

Crossing the River



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Crossing The River

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About the Book

What do you do when you realize that one of your most fundamental ideas about yourself is actually false? What if, immediately after this realization, you suddenly find yourself in a strange place and surrounded by unfamiliar people? How do you resituate yourself in a world that has been turned upside down?

This book is a work of creative nonfiction. It charts the early stage of the author's journey of gender transition, as well as her process of moving away from her home country Norway and settling down in South Africa as a fledgling academic.

The story is a deeply personal one, but also one that will resonate with other transgender people, migrants, academic hopefuls, and border-crossers of all kinds. As a story of coming to terms with an identity in flux, it illustrates the fundamental open-endedness of all human identities.

The book aims to inform, but also to inspire. It aims to share the real-life experiences of one transgender anthropologist with a wider audience. It aims to provide support and encouragement to other transgender people who might feel out of place in the academic world and the world in general.

It aims to highlight some salient features of Norwegian as well as South African society, and to contribute – in a small way – to breaking down European myths about Africa as well as African myths about Europe. Most importantly, it aims to illustrate how our common humanity ultimately transcends all socially created boundaries and divisions. In this age of polarization and zero-sum games, this message cannot be repeated often enough.

Table of contents

Key terms / Please note	vii
Prelude	1
Chapter 1: Coming out	17
Chapter 2: Settling in	39
Chapter 3: Stepping up	67
Chapter 4: Showdown	89
Epilogue 1	109
Epilogue 2	113

Key terms

Transgender / Cisgender

Transgender (abbreviated “trans”) refers to someone whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth.¹ Trans is an umbrella term encompassing *binary* transgender people (i.e. trans women and trans men) as well as *nonbinary* people. I identify as a binary trans woman, which means that I identify as a woman. I also identify as lesbian.

The opposite of transgender is *cisgender*, abbreviated “cis”, which means someone who identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth. Neither cisgender nor transgender are slurs.

Transitioning

The term transitioning has different definitions. Some people use it exclusively in the sense of *medical* transitioning, i.e. hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and sex reassignment surgery (SRS). I disagree with this usage, since the process of transitioning is much wider than the medical aspect only. Additionally, this usage of the term fails to acknowledge the many trans people who do not go through full medical transition or any at all. In this book, I use the term “transitioning” in its most inclusive sense, denoting the whole process of transitioning from living as one gender to living as

¹ Definition as per https://kjonnsinkongruens.no/?page_id=163 (retrieved 23.7.2018)

another. Significantly, this definition includes the *social* aspects of transitioning, which are experienced by *all* trans people, including those who do not opt for medical treatment or for various reasons are unable to access it.

Please note

1. I make no claim to speak for anyone but myself.

2. All personal names have been anonymized except my own and those of certain public figures (including well-known activists and academics). For the sake of privacy, I have chosen to focus on my own transition story and to refrain from talking about other people in more detail than necessary to tell that story. I have also chosen to be reticent about my own non-transition-related personal life.

3. I have deliberately avoided writing too much about interracial relations, for the simple reason that I am currently working on a PhD project about that very topic. My thoughts about race in South Africa will be presented in my thesis, which is due for submission by the end of 2020.

4. This book makes reference to anthropological concepts, academic institutions and individual academics. It is inspired by the methods of ethnography and aspires to contribute to the understanding of the lives of transgender people. However, it is strictly a personal memoir and makes no pretention of being an academic work.

Prelude

*Vess svart e svart og kvitt e kvitt, då e du blind førr alt
Då ser du ikkje lys nå' meir, i varmen bli det kaldt
Du bli ein sjakkbrettmonstrat konstruksjon med pepitarutat sjæl
Vess kvitt før dæ e berre kvitt, har du slådd live' ditt i hjæl*

– Kine Hellebust

The room was huge, cold and dimly lit. It was full of racks on wheels, baskets of plastic and wickerwork brimming with mittens and beanies in all colours and conditions, and polished tables densely stacked with an abundance of vases, china and pewterware. In one corner there were wooden shelves filled with books, and the far wall was a row of huge curtainless windows which were the room's main source of light. The charity thrift store was a messy and shabby place, but I liked it; it resembled my grandparents' attic, only a hundred times larger. I would often come there after school to poke around the shelves and look for treasures – obscure paperback volumes from the 1960s and 1970s, old audio cassettes with interesting music, pewter basins with strange and intricate designs. Most of all, however, I loved to go browsing in the clothes department.

Terrified that anyone might notice, I would pretend to be walking around at random. Sometimes I would look down at my cellphone to make an impression of reading or writing a text message, as if I was buying something for someone else. Luckily the shop was often empty of customers except me, so I would have my privacy as soon as the staff were out of sight. Sometimes I would even bring clothes to the fitting room to

try them on. As long as I bundled up the clothes carefully and carried them under my arm so it was difficult for others to see, I was safe.

And the shoes. I remember wanting to try them on. Not *here*, obviously, I thought; not in public, because I would struggle and people would see me. Each time I returned to the store, I felt closer to putting my plan into action.

Mustering all my courage, I took some pieces of clothing down from the racks and hid a pair of shoes inside the bundle. Then I walked towards the fitting room with a casual air. I did the same routine on the way back to the racks where I put the shoes and clothes back as invisibly as possible. Nobody noticed, I think, although one of the staff members would sometimes give me a funny look whenever I visited the shop after that. Maybe I was just my imagination.

One day I finally found a pair of shoes large enough to fit me, and I bought them. They were old and not particularly pretty, but cheap enough for me to afford on my allowance with plenty to spare.

Another time, I visited a small arts-and-crafts shop in the main street and bought a plastic bead necklace, pretending it was for someone else. After walking a few metres, I started feeling panic welling up inside me; then I turned on my heel and ran back inside the shop and asked if I could undo the purchase. The middle-aged woman behind the counter smiled at me and said that no, unfortunately, that was not possible. The necklace was not at all expensive, but I felt its presence in my pocket to be incriminating, as if I was carrying a murder weapon. As I could not give it to someone else without revealing myself, revealing *it*, I ended up keeping the necklace, a piece in a growing collection of things I was not supposed to have.

At one point, I became sure my mother knew, and I interpreted certain things in that light. Hit by a sudden wave of shame and feeling that what I had been doing was wrong, I gathered all the things I had been buying at the thrift store (all of which I had painstakingly hidden away, and which I had felt sure nobody else knew anything about), put them all in a plastic bag from the supermarket, tied the bag firmly shut and threw it in the bin outside. The shame stuck with me, but it was less intense, as if I had somehow cleansed myself.

It never went away, however, despite my best efforts to suppress it. *It* always bubbled up to the surface, expressing itself in various ways, sometimes very obvious ways that were commented on by my classmates.

What was *it*? What it felt like was a force of nature. Something that had a life of its own. Something which I – despite my smart mouth – was unable to put into words. The feeling of freedom when I dared to walk, or move my hands, in a slightly different manner. The feeling of freedom when I dared to wear several of my nice things simultaneously. The freedom of being seen as something else, something that was more *me*. Yes, *it* was *freedom*. Mixed with apprehension, which, of course, is always the price of true freedom.

It was the 8th of March 2009, and the Lillehammer Socialist Youth, of which I was vice chairperson, was taking part in the local Women's Day celebration. We were sitting in *Yrkeskvinnhuset* – the House of Women Professionals – listening to speeches. I remember there was a speech by the leader of a local nurses' union. Then there was a speech by a

middle-aged woman who, it turned out, had been born as a man. It was the first time I ever saw a trans person in real life.

Months later, I was rushing to the bus stop near my house. I was catching a train to Oslo, presumably to a socialist convention of some sort. I was late, and we lived up the hill, far away from the town centre and the railway station. When I cleared the forest, I could see the bus driving off without me. Desperate, I stuck my thumb out, hoping to hitch a ride with a passing car.

Fortunately, a car did pull over. I thanked the driver profusely, threw my large bag into the back seat and sat down in the front passenger's seat. Casting a glance at the driver, I instantly recognized her face.

– I think I've seen you before! I said.

– Really? she said. – Where?

– At *Yrkeskvinnehuset* on Women's Day. You gave a speech, didn't you? I was there. I'm in the Socialist Youth, we always participate. Your name is Siv, right?

She confirmed it but did not say much more. She seemed very shy. I thanked her again for giving me the lift, and went off to find my train.

Mental health was not taken very seriously among my peers in elementary and middle school, and words like “retard” and “mongo” were commonly used as insults. After moving to Lillehammer and starting high school, I was terrified that my newfound friends would see me as crazy and abandon me, and after a long and painful personal conflict between myself and an adult family member, it was only thanks to my mother's

persistence that I eventually agreed to go for psychological therapy.

The psychologist was a rather young man – perhaps in his early forties – with a dark beard; I will not divulge his name here, but he knows who he is. We had become close, and I considered him not just a therapist, but a friend. It was in the summer of 2009, just around the time of my final exams and just before I was leaving for Kenya, where I would be volunteering for six months. During one of our very last sessions, I told my therapist about the thrift store.

He did not scowl. Instead he smiled, and asked:

– Have you shared this with anyone?

He used the Norwegian word *dele*, and I understood from the way he said it that he meant it in the sense of mutual partaking; he was asking if I had physically shared my crossdressing sessions with someone else. A girlfriend, for example.

I said no, I hadn't. I had kept it a secret, and this was the first time I had told anyone openly about it.

– Perhaps you *should* share it, he said. – At least consider it. If it's a thing that brings you joy, then why not?

Time went by. Lillehammer was just a memory. My mother, stepfather and younger brother had moved away from the hills and mountains and settled some distance away in the much larger city of Fredrikstad, near the coast. I had seen a bit of the world since my high school days. I had lived and worked in Kenya. I had spent two summers doing manual labour on the Arctic island of Spitsbergen. I had done my first academic fieldwork in Fiji in the South Pacific. Now I was a Master's

degree student in social anthropology at the University of Oslo, working in a project about the Norwegian Roma (Gypsy) minority and their integration into the national community.

It happened at a party, probably a birthday party for one of my friends. These things become blurry with time. I believe we were three or four people sitting together, talking, and I was engaged in conversation with one particular guy who was a bit older than me.

I can't even remember what the conversation was about, but I vividly remember stating, matter-of-factly:

– I don't feel like "man" is part of my personal identity. I mean, sure, I have a man's body, but I don't feel it's important to who I am, not in any way. It's just a trivial fact.

My conversation partner became quite agitated, almost as if I had insulted him personally. He started protesting, arguing. It took me a long time to figure out why he reacted the way he did. The fact I had stated was simple and obvious to me, and I was sincerely surprised that my conversation partner – who was otherwise very much like myself, a feminist and socialist activist, with similar views and interests – did not feel the same way.

Whenever there was something in the media about men's issues, for instance when some woman pundit would take the side of men struggling to fit in an increasingly "feminized" society, I would always feel – even though the arguments themselves might be perfectly valid for the people in question – that they were not talking about *me*. I could sympathize, but only from an outside perspective, and I inwardly resented being defined as part of a group I did not feel I belonged to.

A year or two had gone by. I was lying next to her on a double bed in her cozy little student residence in Oslo. We were looking at her laptop screen, browsing clothes in an online shop.

– I wouldn't mind wearing that, I said, pointing. – Or those boots.

She smiled. – Very sexy. I like it too. We could get matching outfits!

Weeks went by. Months, maybe.

– You told me you wanted to try wearing dresses in public! She sounded angry. – Why haven't you done it yet? Tormod does it! You have no reason to be nervous with *us*!

I was upset. I did not feel sorry. What right did she have to berate me like that? Did she think this was a game?

That relationship did not last very long. I am, however, grateful to her – who, I have been told, no longer identifies as a woman – for being the first person who really supported me and encouraged *it* in me.

Another year had passed, and I was lying under a thick blanket on another double bed in a cold suburban bedroom in Cape Town, South Africa. I had shared much with her, things I hadn't truly shared with anyone else before, except in words.

– Can I ask you something? she said.

– Of course, I replied.

– If you could choose right now – if you were given the opportunity to become a girl – would you do it?

I was silent for a while. I wanted to seem like I was mulling it over, but I was not; I knew the answer already, because I had asked myself the same question over and over again during the

last few years. But it was so personal, so deep... And I had never actually said it out loud to anyone before.

– I think I would, I said.

Then I corrected myself:

– No. I *would*.

I've always been good at intellectual stuff. Remembering facts and seeing patterns and connections. Reasoning things out. These things were always my strength, and I always did very well in school because of it. In middle school, a tough place, being smart earned me a certain amount of respect, and being a smart-mouth saved my life socially. My mother has sometimes said that I must have inherited my abilities from my father, but I know I get it from both of them.

My domain was always the realm of thought, words and cold, clear rationality. *It*, however, was not a thought. *It* was a feeling, an intuition, and that was not my home turf. As a kid I was never good at understanding my own feelings and intuitions, nor was I very good at expressing them.

I excelled at deluding myself, explaining away the obvious, twisting and contorting reality to make it fit my preconceived worldview. I did it automatically, without even articulating the thoughts in my mind. The shame of reality was too overwhelming to face. Were we ever taught about these things in school? Why not? Were there no other people like me in the 1990s and early 2000s? No people like me who were living in the open? Of course there were! Society simply pretended they didn't exist. What little glimpses we did get were through jokes and so-called funny movies, and instead of understanding we learned to deride, to despise.

I was in my twenty-seventh year, and for the last couple of years I had been hearing and reading a lot about *transgenderism* and *transsexualism* on the radio and in the newspapers. The talking heads were saying that more and more people in Norway and globally were gender-transitioning. The media was hugely interested, of course. I always tried to avoid those particular news stories, and I used to walk inconspicuously out of the room when transgenderism was discussed on the radio at my mother's place. When it became a topic of discussion around the dinner table, as it sometimes became at my father's house, I grinned and bore it and feigned a purely academic interest, or no interest at all. No, I told myself over and over, what I was feeling was not real; I was just over-thinking as usual, or perhaps not thinking at all. I didn't even know *what* I was wrong about, I just knew I was wrong, and made up any number of reasons to justify it. I had to hold *it* in, and sooner or later *it* – this dangerous, shameful delusion of mine – would die on its own accord.

It always surfaced when I was feeling most secure and confident. When my first girlfriend broke up with me, I was heartbroken, but I knew what was up and what was down; I had a sense of direction and meaning, and a very strong sense of self. With the dark-bearded psychologist during my high school days, I always felt understood and accepted. Conversely, sometimes things would be stable on the outside, but I would be in a very bad place emotionally. Those were the times when *it* lay buried under mile-deep layers of ice through which no light could penetrate. Recent events – events having to do with that cold suburban room in Cape Town – had melted the ice and brought *it* to the surface again. The land was rising.

During the autumn of 2017 I went for counselling once more, to deal with my self-esteem which had become debilitatingly low. One of my exes – the one with the dresses in public – had asked me to do it the year before, and my mother had recently given me the same advice. The precarity of my work situation had increased my stress; I was feeling inadequate and scared of the future, and would become irritable and sometimes angry for no real reason. Better get some professional help, I agreed. This time, the evaluator decided I was not ill enough to be given individual therapy, so she offered me group counselling instead.

It worked all too well. I sat there listening to what the counsellor said about accepting oneself, and felt more terrified than ever of *that* which was growing inside me. I knew that if I were to get anywhere, if I were to increase my quality of life and regain some of my strength, patience and compassion, I had to deal with *it*. I did not mention *it* to the two psychologists or to any of the other participants in the counselling group. It was too painful a topic even for that safest of settings.

As I was living temporarily at my mother's place, I couldn't escape sociality, couldn't withdraw into myself as I had sometimes done when I was living on my own as a university student in various flats in Oslo. Back then, I had also had my collection of forbidden things and the freedom to use them *as* I wished and *when* I wished. These things were now stashed in an anonymous-looking cardboard box in an out-of-the-way corner of my bedroom. I had not "purged" before moving.

My thoughts were a mess; so much so that I can't even remember really thinking, only feeling. I needed to talk – *had* to talk – but did I have the words? Did I have the courage? And how does one even initiate a conversation like that? What if I was brushed away, dismissed? Or worse, scolded? I did not

wish to seem like I was creating drama for nothing, or like I was crying out for attention, or like I had concocted some farfetched theory from bits and pieces of half-understood concepts. I simply wanted to open up.

The day came. Sometime in mid-to-late September; I don't recall the exact date. The time had come to have a talk with my mother.

I remember asking her to come with me into my room, so we could talk in private. I also remember staring into the bedsheets – cream-coloured, I believe they were – for long periods of time, trying to get the words out, words that seemed to get stuck in my throat. I ended up speaking in a weird, staccato way, but I managed to get the message out, more or less like this:

– That... that my gender identity might... not... be... what it looks like on the outside.

My mother had tears in her eyes while I talked. When I stopped, she was silent for a while, and then said:

– I'm not surprised. I sort of knew it all along.

Those were words of acknowledgement. The fear I had had, was gone. I was balanced and whole.

My mother then asked me:

– But are you saying you want to be a girl?

And since I couldn't say "no", I replied:

– I don't know.

My brother and I then travelled to Spain to spend a week with my paternal grandparents, who had been living there more or less permanently for the last two decades. I had told my mother that I would start experimenting with aesthetic expressions, and Spain was the first time I allowed myself to do so freely. I have no idea if it was visible enough for my brother to notice (or be embarrassed about); I carried a feminine shoulder bag and wore more and more makeup, but there was not much more to it than that, except that I had shaved my beard, which never looked very convincing anyhow. One day, when my brother and I visited the local market, I bought a dress. My grandmother noticed it, and asked me, with sincere curiosity, why I had bought it and whom it was for; she assumed it was for my girlfriend. I was embarrassed and tried to evade her questions, but eventually had to admit that I had bought it for myself.

Back in Norway, I got my left ear pierced, and continued to shave and wear makeup, even at work. My stepfather, with whom I rode the train every morning, did not comment, at least not to me. He and I were both working for a large trade union whose headquarters were located in Oslo.

I was still hesitant. I remember walking along rainy streets in Fredrikstad pondering what I would like to call myself if it were up to me. It was by no means the first time I had thought about that; it had been a recurring topic over the years. Over time, I had narrowed my possibilities down to three names: Laila, Miriam and Helena. Why those? I don't really know. They felt good, they felt right. They were nice to say, they felt down-to-earth, and none of them had any strong associations attached to them – not in my mind, at any rate. I lingered on Helena for a little while, because it seemed to fit rather nicely with my birth name. I did not yet seriously consider the option

of giving up my male birth name altogether. That seemed too drastic a change.

I was still entertaining the notion that I might be genderqueer or non-binary – terms I had only recently learned the meaning of – not because I really felt that way, but because it allowed me to hold on to status quo, to avoid the upheavals I knew must come if I dared to really look myself in the eyes.

I had often flattered myself by thinking that I had great self-knowledge, that I had explored every nook and cranny of my own mind. What a delusion! Half my mind-space was sealed off with iron gates and a sign saying “Out of bounds”, and what lay behind those gates I did not know; I only saw it out of the corner of my eye, since I dared not turn to face it, and it was no more than a grey haze.

Slowly but surely, I started turning toward the grey haze on the other side of the iron bars. Slowly but surely I did turn. The key was mine. Indeed, it was I myself who had forged those gates and locked them, and the sign was in my own handwriting.

There came a need to talk to others. After all, it was obvious, even to me at the time, that I had only just started a long process. I was getting ready for the next stage. It’s difficult to explain this feeling; after my conversation with my mother, it was as if I had boarded a train, and that I was always moving, every minute, ever so slowly, towards a final destination.

So many metaphors. None of them fully satisfactory.

It was Sunday evening the 26th of November 2017, and I was heading for bed. Monday was a working day and I had to get up at six o’clock to catch the train to Oslo.

Although I was sleepy, I did not go straight to bed. Like many other nights, I decided to dress up a bit. Just playing around. Experimenting. I found my favourite dress and put it on, and in addition I decided to put on a cheap black wig. Since my head was completely shaven, the wig, although simple, made me feel a bit more feminine. I got my phone out and took a few selfies, using the camera as a mirror.

I looked at myself and at the photos I had taken, blurry because of the inadequate lighting, and then I saw my face. And it was not the face of a young man in a wig, but the face of a natural woman. It had my family's traits and reminded me of one of my cousins. It was *my* face. It was perhaps not a particularly beautiful face, but it was *my* face, and I was looking into *my* eyes. It was the face of Miriam – I instantly knew that this was my name, and I have never once had second thoughts about that – and I found myself suddenly longing for someone to call me by that name.

A life that could have been. No! A life that *could yet be*.

That was the moment I knew. The moment when I finally saw myself for what I truly was. I knew where the road would lead, and I realized that this was what I had always wanted: To live the rest of my life as the woman I had known my whole life, deep down, that I was. Hadn't my mother always told me that she was sure I was going to be a girl?

There was a slight undertone of trepidation as I thought, *Well, this means I'm not "just" genderqueer. I'm binary transgender.* The changes in my life would be enormous. I knew it was going to be a long and difficult journey and that the goal was distant, but I also knew that one day I would reach it. In a sense, the worst part was already over.

In one of the photos, the glare from the lamp seems to channel the light that was ignited inside me that evening, and which I've been feeling ever since.

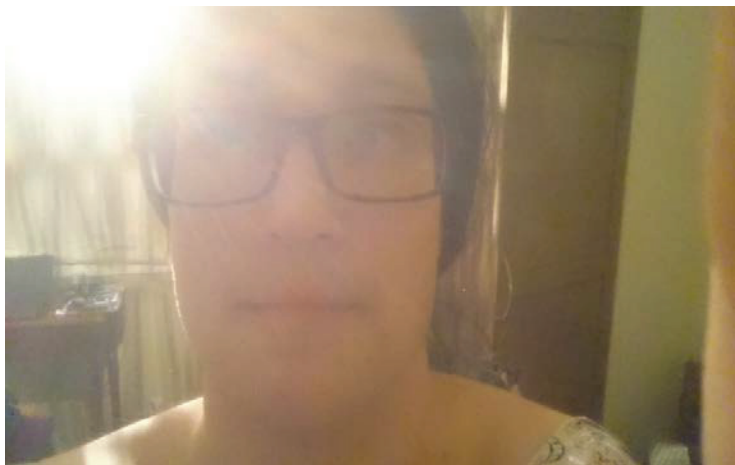
The darkness was already beginning to fade. A deep bitterness, which I had almost stopped noticing because it had been part of me for so many years, let go. Stress and fear let go. I started crying, silently, because I didn't want to wake my family who were already sleeping. My life had changed, and nothing would ever be the same again.

So frightening, yet so harmless.

So complex, yet so simple.

This was what I had been hiding from. This was what I had gone for so many years thinking of only as a nebulous, menacing *it*.

It had a name now. Its name was *me*.



Chapter 1: Coming out

My name is Miriam Aurora Hammeren Pedersen. I was born Brage Hammeren Pedersen in Oslo, Norway in 1990. For reasons I will explain later, the latter is still my legal name for the time being, but I go by Miriam except in strictly bureaucratic contexts. The story I've just told is the story of how I came to realize that I was a woman and – in spite of my physiology and everything I had been brought up to believe about myself – not a man. A lot of it has been blurred by the haze of time and by the even more opaque haze of deep and strong emotion. I've tried to recount the story the way it seems to me when I look back on it: Jerky, episodic, kaleidoscopic; a story spanning many years and many localities and involving a number of people; the story of a realization that slowly grew, then receded, then grew again, and blossomed into life-changing fruition at a certain moment not too long ago.

What I will now tell you is the story of my first year “out”. I am telling it because it's a rather unusual story, unusual enough that I believe others, too, might find it interesting and perhaps even inspirational. Being transgender is unusual in itself, of course, and perhaps every transgender person ought to write a book about their experiences. It would certainly help us become more visible and better understood by the cisgender community.

What makes my story a bit different, however, is the fact that just weeks before I came out as transgender, I got accepted for a PhD position in anthropology at the University of Cape Town in South Africa – an offer I accepted. My story involves several layers of simultaneous border-crossing. It was in

Norway that I revealed my gender identity, but it was in Cape Town I took my first baby steps into the world as an out-and-about trans woman. A strange city on a strange continent, literally a world away from my home country. I was floating freely about as if in transit between one life and another; few things were familiar, few things were what they seemed, and I had to rebuild my identity more or less from scratch.

Perhaps you're asking yourself what kind of crazy person would come out as transgender and then immediately take off for another continent to undertake a multi-year, solitary academic project. Well, I had applied for doctoral studies well before I came out as trans. I had lived in Cape Town for ten weeks from June to August 2017 as a Social Entrepreneurship student at the UCT Graduate School of Business and became fascinated by South African society to such an extent that I decided I would like to make a closer anthropological study of it. What is more, I was given the opportunity to work closely with great scholars in the field.

I've always been a restless person, and I've had a tendency, for better or for worse, to gamble with my mental and emotional well-being in the name of curiosity and adventure. Was it right of me to go on another adventure and travel far away from family and friends at this critical moment? I would have been able to provide more support and comfort to my family members, and they would have been able to provide more support and comfort to me, if I had stayed within visiting distance.

All in all, however, I believe my decision was a good one. I would have regretted it deeply if I had turned the South African opportunity down. First of all, life felt stagnant and I had been playing with the thought of moving abroad for several years. Secondly, my contract with the trade union was

temporary; I had been searching for permanent employment ever since I finished my Master's degree, without any luck, and my fruitless job search had been gnawing at my sense of purpose and self-worth. My feeling was that embarking on a PhD would at the *very* least be a way of keeping myself busy with something useful, as well as an investment in my own future. What I didn't yet know when I accepted the offer from UCT was that working on my PhD project would rekindle my love of anthropology and inspire me to stay in the field.

It's time to begin the story proper. I'll start off by recounting what I think of as the Big Week, the week of my official coming-out to my parents and of my first encounter with the Norwegian transgender community.

As I sat on the train from Fredrikstad to Oslo on that pitch-dark Monday morning, November 27th, 2017, it was as if my vision had improved overnight. I noticed new colours and new details on the buildings we passed, and I followed the faint light that was slowly growing on the horizon. I had to fight back tears that whole day, something which had never happened to me before. I sat at my office desk, behind the computer screen, doing my work and all the while thinking about this wonderful thing that had happened, this magnificent thing that was, as yet, a secret to all my colleagues. It didn't feel like I was the one who had changed; it was as if reality itself had changed.

I knew that I had to come out officially to my close family as soon as possible. I wrote to my father, asking him when he would be able to come to Fredrikstad or Oslo. Something had happened, I told him, and I urgently needed to let him know,

but I could only tell him about it face to face. My father understood that something extraordinary and very serious was afoot, and we arranged to meet on the following Sunday. It was a good time to meet him, since it would be Father's Day and just a few days after his birthday.

I had been looking up transgender organizations, and on the train home to Fredrikstad I wrote an email to the Federation of Trans Persons in Norway (FTPN). I knew next to nothing about the Federation, but it seemed like the best place to begin. Here is the text in its entirety, translated from Norwegian to English:

Topic: Needing advice and input

To: FTPN mailbox

Sent: Monday, 27 November 2017, 15:55

Hi,

I am contacting you because I need advice and input about life as a transgender person.

I am 27 years old and was born with a male body. For about ten years I have been feeling a strong dissonance between the gender category to which I was assigned at birth, and what I feel like on the "inside". Throughout this period, I have been experimenting with feminine expressions, but it has been difficult, and I have been suppressing my feelings to a large degree. It is only in later years, with the support of understanding partners, that I have allowed myself to feel those feelings and express them again. During the last six months or so, I have been feeling more and more that I am a woman, and I have now reached a point where I am no longer in doubt. At the moment I am in the process of "coming out" to my closest family and friends, which is very challenging, but of course completely necessary.

I will be moving to South Africa in January and will be staying there for about three years, so a medical/psychological evaluation is not an option yet. In my period abroad, I plan to become more and more open in my gender expression, which will also be good exercise for the day I might wish to live full-time as a woman. I also know that it is fully possible to be evaluated for transsexualism in South Africa (and that the criteria for treatment might even be less strict than in Norway), but I am unsure whether this would be a wise option for me, since I do not know if I will be able to access any follow-up treatment when I return to Norway. So for the time being, I intend to postpone this.

What do you think? Is my situation common, and am I handling it correctly (and is there even a “correct” way to handle it)? The thing is, I have very few people around me to whom I feel I can speak openly about my situation. I do know some trans people, but they are few, and rather distant acquaintances at that. Is there anyone at FTPN with whom I can have a chat, or who can write back to me with some thoughts and comments? I would appreciate it very much.

*Sincerely,
Brage (Miriam)*

That night I remember laying in my bed, looking up into the darkness and thinking: “I’m a girl. I’m actually a girl”. I was still overwhelmed by the realization, and all the little puzzle pieces that were still falling into place the more I reflected on it. As I later wrote in my journal: “I felt euphoria flowing through me like a wild river”.

I think it must have been sometime that week, perhaps that very day, that I decided to confide in my grandmother. I have always been very close to her and had an intuitive feeling that she would understand. She is a wise woman. Although she was

seventy-six years old at the time, she'd had an uncle who was homosexual, which made me suspect she might have a more accepting attitude towards things relating to sexuality and gender than most others of her generation. I texted her on Facebook and worded myself in as roundabout a way as I could manage:

“What would you say if someone in our family decided they wanted to live as the opposite gender? For example, if Tanja decided she wanted to be a boy, or I wanted to be a girl?”

And she replied that she would accept it, since she loved all her grandchildren, but that she would be concerned because of the practical difficulties of transitioning. Then she asked:

“Are you referring to yourself?”

And I replied:

“Yes.”

We continued texting, and I let my grandmother know that she was the first person to whom I had revealed this crucial piece of information. Not even with my mother had I been this explicit, although obviously I suspected she had a decent idea of the truth. Now, my grandmother said, she understood why I had bought that dress at the market in Spain.

On Tuesday, the day after I emailed FTPN, I had a telephone conversation with my father. I couldn't fully keep my secret from him, and I also wanted him to be a bit prepared for our big talk. He guessed roughly what was going on. It was already eleven o'clock at night, and we kept talking until past midnight, even though the next day was a work day for both of us. I had to go down into the laundry room to avoid waking up my mother and the others.

Always the voice of reason and moderation, my father had a lot to say, and a lot of arguments to make. I did not argue with him; when he stated his opinions, I simply listened and

accepted them. I don't think he had anticipated that, and I felt it made an impression on him. Many of my father's points were valid. His main concern was that *if* I wanted to go "all the way" – he was speaking theoretically, of course, since I still hadn't told him everything – then moving to South Africa would be an incredibly bad idea, since I probably wouldn't be able to move forward with any kind of transition while there. There were safety issues; after all, the African continent is not generally famous for its progressive attitudes to LGBTQ+ issues. It would be better, in his opinion, to wait, perhaps one semester, during which I would also be able to save up money and prepare myself materially as well as emotionally for three years abroad. My father was especially concerned about medical transitioning, to which I responded that it wasn't part of my plans, at least not in the foreseeable future.

I still didn't feel that he actually expected me to end up going "all the way", but at least my father now knew I was dealing with some sort of gender identity struggles. Although he did not know their exact nature or extent, I wouldn't have to explain *everything* from scratch on the following Sunday.

I woke up next morning at half past five. I grabbed my phone and checked my inbox while still in bed and saw that a new email had appeared. It was from someone named Jeanette Solstad Remø, who introduced herself as the vice president of FTPN and a transgender activist. She told me she was travelling and would get back to my questions within a week. I wrote back to her and thanked her for the swift reply. The phone call with my father had instilled me with some new doubts about my identity, which I expressed in the email to Jeanette. I came very close to brushing off my initial email as a heat-of-the-moment thing.

Jeanette wrote back to me the next day, and her reply was long and comprehensive. Her clear message and reassuring tone helped me get my feet back on the ground. Jeanette expressed no doubts whatsoever regarding my transness. On the contrary: She underlined the fact that trans people are generally “experts” at suppressing their gender identities (implying, correctly, that this was what I was still doing). In hindsight, I’m sure Jeanette had seen countless cases like me before, and that she knew well what was going on. This was probably the reason why she decided to respond so soon, even though she was busy.

She also told me that not all trans people choose to go through full surgery, and that there is a range of intermediate options. That part was extremely important to me, because the thought of bottom surgery made me uneasy, and I was not at all sure at that time that it was something I would ever want to do. Jeanette made me understand that this did not mean I was less trans or that my feelings about my gender identity were less valid. Later on, I came to understand that there are different “camps” with different opinions on this matter. Some people believe that it is only those who go through the “full package” of hormone therapy and surgery who may truly call themselves transgender (or *transsexual*). I praised the skies that I got in touch with the right “camp” at that crucial early moment, otherwise I might very well have ended up locking myself in the closet again.

Jeanette and I continued our correspondence, and she became my very first contact and confidante within the Norwegian transgender community. She was the first person – except, perhaps, for that ex with the dresses – who not only accepted me but encouraged me, and gave me the feeling that being trans could actually be a *good* thing and not necessarily a

flaw. A former submarine captain, Jeanette had been one of the pioneering activists for transgender rights in Norway back in the 1980s when trans people were first starting to organize. She had also been one of the leading activists for allowing people to change their legal gender without being required to undergo sex reassignment surgery. That law was finally changed in 2016, an event I took note of, although I wasn't out as trans at the time. Jeanette's story has been covered by Norwegian and international media, and she has even been interviewed by Amnesty International. Reading about her life, I recognize myself in it.

On Wednesday evening I stayed in Oslo after work, because I had been invited to a party at my former workplace, the TV and radio ratings department of a large statistics company. I had been a tech support representative and a technician's assistant at that company from January 2012 until December 2016, almost five years. It had been a lovely place to work, and my former colleagues were good friends of mine.

Several of them were in fact lesbian, gay or bisexual. At the end of the evening, after each of us had all had more than one can of beer and more than one glass of red wine, those colleagues started talking about their experiences of coming out. They started a round, with everyone giving their "coming-out story". It was fascinating to listen to these stories. I had never heard them before, and I appreciated the opportunity to get to know my colleagues better.

Eventually, since we were going around the table from person to person, it became my turn to tell *my* story. Nobody in the room, of course, had any inkling that I was anything but cisgender and heterosexual, and most assumed I had no story to tell at all, but as one of my colleagues, Jorunn, said:

– Who can tell? Perhaps he has a story that none of us knows about!

– Well, I said, – I actually do have a story.

And I shared my situation with them, because they were people I trusted.

– I can't give you the ending, though, I said, – Because I'm in the middle of it right now. I'm having the talk with my parents this weekend.

There was silence. Then people started talking. I remember Jorunn, turning to her girlfriend and then to me:

– I was just sitting here thinking: *Him?! I'd never have guessed.*

Everyone was supportive, and I'm especially grateful to Jorunn, to whom I had always felt close, for making me feel so safe and reassured.

On Friday, while I was sitting at my office desk working, I got a message from an acquaintance of mine who worked for an organization called Queer Youth Norway. Thea, who had some knowledge of my situation, told me there was going to be a gathering for transgender and gender-nonconforming people in Oslo that very evening. It would be hosted by FRI – The Norwegian Organization for Sexual and Gender Diversity. Did I want to come? I mulled it over for a moment, then said of course. I was presenting as male that day and hadn't prepared myself in any way, but Thea told me that this would be the last *T-kafé* of the year, and I knew it might well be my only chance to attend a meeting like that before I moved to South Africa.

So, I stayed in Oslo after work, after letting my stepfather know that I wouldn't be joining him on the train. I texted my mother to let her know where I was going. It was a way for me

to prepare her for the talk I knew I was going to have with *her* too, on Sunday evening.

I was nervous. Very nervous. I had never been a member of FRI or its predecessor LLH. I had never been a member of Queer Youth Norway, since I had never seen myself as queer. In fact, I had had little contact with the queer community at all, except through those personal friends of mine who were gay and lesbian, and being a shy and brooding person by nature, I did not take it for granted that I would feel at home or be well received. The other people at the gathering would have known who and what they were for a long time, perhaps their whole lives. Would they welcome me and acknowledge me as one of them despite my lack of insider credentials? I had been living in denial for eleven years, ashamed of what I was. Now I was ashamed of having lived in denial and not having been strong enough to come out earlier. Perhaps they would scorn me as a Jenny-come-lately. Or worse: Perhaps they would take one look at me, shake their heads and say no, you're deluding yourself, you don't belong here.

I arrived an hour early, as agreed, and was greeted at the door by Thea. We went into the kitchen where the meeting was to take place. In the kitchen I met a trans man, a well-known activist who has often been in the national media. There were a few other people there as well, but they seemed shy just like me, and we didn't talk much.

My fears of rejection turned out to be unfounded, but the meeting was nevertheless a scary experience simply because of my nerves. I was almost trembling in my chair. At six o'clock, more people started arriving. Several of the others obviously knew each other well, and some even seemed a bit closed and aloof; others were quite new, like me, and it was with them I mostly talked. I got to know three young trans men and one

non-binary person, and I stayed in touch with them all afterwards, to varying degrees.

Thea had told me earlier in the day that there would be sexologists present – experts on gender, sexuality and reproductive health – and that they would be available for counselling sessions. I had emailed one of the sexologists directly, asking if she still had a vacant spot. She did have one, due to a last-minute cancellation, and I made an appointment with her. When the time came, I got up, walked out of the kitchen and found the sexologist's office; she was a friendly young woman, not much older than myself, and I felt at ease with her at once.

I wanted to give her the background of my situation, so I told her my story, slowly and with some difficulty – it was the first time I had told it from start to finish – and by the time I was done, our hour had passed. I panicked a bit; had I really wasted our counselling session? No, said the sexologist; she had let me speak freely because she felt it was right, and she was listening with sincere interest and engagement. She was almost in tears, she said, and when I asked her if my story was similar to those of other trans people, she replied in the affirmative.

Unfortunately, this was the last day of counselling, so I wouldn't get any follow-up sessions. I was happy with the one, though. I left the sexologist's office and joined the others in the kitchen for what was left of the gathering. Despite my nerves, it was nice to see, in real life, that there were others like myself, and to be reassured once more that there was nothing wrong with me. Though I still felt new and inexperienced, I told myself – and was told by others – that everyone has to go through that stage at some point.

Later on, while living in South Africa, I would keep in touch with the Norwegian trans community online. In one of the Facebook groups I've even seen Siv, that kind woman who gave me a ride to the railway station in Lillehammer nine years ago. I wonder if she remembers it.

I said I was very nervous before the *T-kafé*, and I was telling the truth. Those nerves, however, were absolutely nothing compared to how I felt before my meeting with my father in Oslo two days later. It seems that coming out as transgender involves constantly experiencing ever-increasing levels of nervousness, turning us into veritable trailblazers of anxiety. It makes you wonder about those people who claim that being trans is a choice. What sane person would willingly choose to go through something like this?

The fact that my father and I have always been close, and know each other well, was a great help. Our recent phone call also helped. We went straight to the matter, with my father talking and talking and me replying with equal vigour, because we're both like that. We talked openly on the subway, loud enough for anyone around us to hear, but at that point I was past caring. We discussed gender identity issues in general and my situation in particular. All the twists and turns of doubt and revelation I had gone through had by now left me quite sure of who and what I was, and I found, to my surprise and relief, that anecdotes and intellectual arguments no longer had any effect on my sense of self. This made me much less nervous; moreover, it actually made me enjoy the conversation.

We walked down from Nydalen subway station along the river Akerselva, which flows down from the hills into the city

centre and the Oslo Fjord. The weather was strange – not quite autumn and not quite winter, the air moist but carrying a distinct chill, and the ground crisp but not icy. The sky was clear, and the city was veiled in a white mist coming in from the sea and through which the pale light of the sun filtered down on us. My father and I were both wearing thick jackets and woollen beanies.

When we reached Bjølsen, our conversation started turning from a general discussion of gender identity towards a discussion of my specific situation. My father mentioned a mutual acquaintance of ours, a person my age who in recent years had come out as genderfluid, identifying as “95% male and 5% female”. We talked about the spectrum of gender identities, and my father stressed the importance of being sure where I belonged on the spectrum, and of not making rash decisions based on the flow of pent-up emotions that had just been released. The force of the flow might abate with time, he warned, comparing it to a broken dam.

– Well, I said, – It’s difficult to say exactly where I belong on the spectrum. But I can say for sure that I’m more than 50% female. Even more than 60%.

We continued walking, past the bridge and into the borough of Sagene. It was all well-known territory to me, because I had lived for several years in the vicinity, walking up and down the river every day. It’s a beautiful area, perhaps the most beautiful part of the city of Oslo.

We had reached the top of a steep slope. Struggling to maintain control of the words which were trying as hard as they could to get stuck in my throat on the way out, I told my father, slowly, but steadily and with confidence:

– The fact of the matter is that I’m a girl, and I want to live as one.

My father, who is one of the most talkative persons I know, did not reply. We kept walking down the slope and along the river for another fifteen minutes without either of us saying a word. Those fifteen minutes made a stronger impression on me than anything that had been said between us that day, or indeed at any other time during my period of coming out.

When I told my mother, I was less nervous, because I had an intuitive feeling that she already knew what I was going to say. Nevertheless, it needed to be said, because I wanted there to be no uncertainty and no misunderstandings. Perhaps it was really more for *me* than for her; to say it out loud was to make it real. There was an almost magical significance to the words:

– I want to live as a girl.

– I knew, she replied in a kind, matter-of-fact way.

Some time later, my mother told me that there had always been signs. I had moved house several times while I lived in Oslo, and when she and the rest of my family had been there to help me, she had noticed certain things – things, I thought, that I had no doubt laboured intensely to hide. I wasn't as cunning as I had imagined.

My mother told me, again, that she was not surprised. Hearing that always made me feel good. Validated.

I had been living with my mother, my stepfather and my brother for about four months, since I came back from my first stay in South Africa. Things were getting a bit intense; my mother and I are both strong-willed individuals, perhaps too alike in that respect, since our opinions are not always in accord. We also had our dog, Kira, who needed her daily walks and tending to, and my brother had recently entered into a

relationship – his first one – with a very nice girl who had a two-month old baby boy. It was an eventful period in our household.

Christmas time arrived with its additional hustle and bustle, and I spent the last few days at my mother's house, helping decorate the Christmas tree together with my family, including my brother's girlfriend and my step-grandmother who had come down from the west coast and would be staying for the duration of the holidays. Christmas Eve itself I would be spending with my father in Gjøvik. I borrowed my stepfather's car and drove there on the 23rd of December – a three-hour trip. South of Oslo, it was raining; north of Oslo, it was snowing heavily. Winter was finally coming, and I was glad I was driving with proper tires.

That Christmas was nice but strange at the same time. All my aunts and uncles on my father's side knew I was trans, thanks to my mistake of having posted something in a transgender Facebook group which I had thought was closed, but which was in fact open for all to see. While I knew my father's sister had talked to my father about it (why hadn't she come directly to me instead?), none of my aunts or uncles bothered to bring the matter up; instead there was an awkward silence about it. With my father, my father's wife and my grandmother, things were less weird, and at the request of my grandmother – and with her support – I came out to my grandfather too.

Born in 1935, my father's father is the oldest living member of my immediate family, and although we've been quite close and have known each other well for many years, I was more than a bit nervous about revealing my transgender identity to a man of his generation and age. It went surprisingly well; my grandmother had prepared him in advance, so the revelation

wouldn't be too much of a shock. After that, he has been quite open about gender-related things and has often brought such topics up in conversations with me. Although advanced in age, my grandfather is a highly educated and worldly-wise man who used to travel the world for business and has most likely seen a lot more of the human condition than he's ever shared with his children and grandchildren!

My grandmother later told me that my grandfather's main worry regarding my transness was that I might somehow change and become a stranger to him. When I met him again some months later and he saw that I was still the same (though wearing a hairband, a dress, and leather sandals with straps), he stopped worrying. At least that's what my grandmother told me; my grandfather, used to keeping his feelings private, never brought it up with me himself.

The concern that my personality might change was also on my mother's mind. I tried my best to console her with words, but I think this is one of those cases where words mean little and action means everything. With time, I thought, it would become clear that I was not changing into someone else; I was becoming more fully myself, removing inhibitions that had choked the best parts of me and given me unnecessary anxiety and grief. If anything were to change in me, it would not be a change for the worse; it would definitely be a change for the better.

When Christmas was over, I placed my suit in its bag and hung it in the closet for good. My suits have always fit me well and been very nice-looking, or so I've been told, but to me a suit has never been much more than a uniform of male presentability. Wearing a suit has always felt a bit like having a beard; it confirmed my manhood and allowed me to blend in as "one of the guys" but had little real meaning to me. Suits

were part of the gender game, and I was now moving to the other side of the board.

An interesting discovery I've made is that it's easier to come out to distant friends and acquaintances than to your closest friends and family. Some of the first people who got to know about my situation were people I hadn't met for a long time. The first significant person outside my family whom I came out to was Ragnhild, my best friend since our high school days when we were activists in the Socialist Youth. I was so nervous and preoccupied that I don't remember exactly how it happened. Some days later I came out to Nadine, also a close friend from my Lillehammer days; we met at a café in Oslo and talked for a couple of hours, and on our way home, I asked her to wait for a few minutes because I had something to tell her. As usual, it took me a rather long time to get the words out of my mouth, but I did, and Nadine was wholly supportive. She even asked if she could tell her twin sister, who had been active in the queer community for many years. After my coming-out to Nadine, it became less difficult for me to come out to others; it was as if my throat and tongue had loosened; as if I had gotten a bit more used to the idea of being a woman, of being trans, of being Miriam.

As December turned into January and 2017 turned into 2018, my departure for South Africa suddenly started feeling much more imminent. There were people in Cape Town who needed to be informed about my situation; most importantly, my academic supervisor, and my landlady-to-be, a woman named Maria R. whom I had met in the course of my work during my previous stay in Cape Town. At the time, I didn't

know either of them well, and was not sure what their reactions would be when I told them I was transgender. I did what I usually do – hoped for the best and braced for the worst – and was very pleasantly surprised when both my supervisor and Maria turned out to be exceedingly supportive.

On January the 2nd, another *T-kafé* was held in Oslo. This time I was prepared; I had put on copious amounts of makeup and dressed as femininely as my limited wardrobe allowed. In fact, I was happier with my looks than I had ever been, and I walked into the FRI kitchen full of the confidence I had wholly lacked the last time. The clientele was not the same as before, and I got into a conversation with some very nice people who lived close to Fredrikstad. How typical, I thought, to have lived in Fredrikstad for months, and to start making friends only weeks before I would be moving to another country! But I kept in touch with them all, and even met some of them on my next visit to Norway.

I had started packing now, my suitcase was gaping on the living-room floor and various necessities of life were spread out on a table next to it. My passport and vaccination certificates were there. Because I came out as trans so soon before my departure for South Africa, I didn't have time to legally change my name and gender. I could, but if I had, I would have had to wait for the application to be processed and a new passport to be issued, and I would have had to re-apply for my South African study visa. As the process of obtaining all the necessary documents – police clearance, medical certificates, etc. – might well take months, I decided it would be better to go to South Africa as planned rather than putting my life on hold for a full semester or more. My current passport would expire in 2021 anyway, so I decided to go

through with the legal name and gender change as soon as I had finished my degree.

The prospect of changing my name has probably been one of the hardest parts of transitioning. I've always viewed my name as a gift from my parents, and additionally, the name Brage has a meaning I like: It's the name of the Norse god of poetry and eloquence. As the name of a specific mythological character, unfortunately, it has no feminine equivalent. I have already mentioned how I chose the name Miriam; however, I also chose a middle name which I felt to be a true substitute from Brage. That name was Aurora, the name I would have been given if I had been assigned female at birth. In a sense, then, I had always had a female name, and by using Aurora as my middle name I would honour my parents and the name change would feel less like giving back a precious gift.

That is how my name became Miriam Aurora. Perhaps a bit ostentatious, but no more so than many other girls' names out there.

It was my final week in Norway, and the time had come for me to say goodbye to my colleagues at the office and to my close friends. Then suddenly it was the 19th of January, and I was leaving snowy Fredrikstad for sunny Cape Town to start what was, for all intents and purposes, a new life. It was a day of excitement and sadness, especially the latter, which I had put off for as long as possible. My mother, my brother and my stepfather all came with me to Oslo Airport, and my father met us there. I was feeling a bit giddy. Kira the dog joined us into the check-in hall, so I got to say a final goodbye to her as well.

Kira was mainly my brother's responsibility. However, during the last week, I had been working from home and preparing for the trip and thus spending a lot of time with Kira, taking her for walks every day. She was with me when I wore a dress in public for the first time in my life. Kira had such a strange personality, sleeping in the strangest of places and sometimes running around the house, legs barely touching the ground – she almost broke my glasses once, throwing herself at my face. And sometimes she would act like a human being, demanding to have a seat at the dinner table. She looked like an Ewok from the Star Wars movies.

We said our goodbyes, and I went into the queue for the X-ray check. I boarded the plane and sat down in my window seat, looking outside at the heavy snowfall and the workers spraying the wings of the airplane with de-icing fluid. It was evening and already dark. After taking off, we first stopped in Stockholm to pick up more passengers. Then we set off for Addis Abeba, where I would transit. I noted the moment when we put the southernmost islands of Greece behind us. Goodbye for now, Europe!

Because of all the passport checks, I had decided not to put on much makeup. I had not started any hormonal therapy or even gone for hair removal. However, despite all this, when I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes, I felt content with the fact that not only was I a woman, I was a beautiful, complete woman.

Chapter 2: Settling in

It was midday on the 20th of January 2018, and we were descending. My journey from Oslo had taken eighteen hours in total. The skies were clear and the sun was shining, and looking out of my window I could see Table Mountain, that quintessential landmark of Cape Town.

The landing wheels touched the runway and the airplane gave a jolt. I was back on South African soil. I had taken the big leap and was safe and sound on the other side – or was I?

Maria R., who was leaving for a week-long stay in Macedonia, met me at the airport together with her mother to give me the house keys. After I had bought my necessities at Woolworths, Maria's mother drove me to Mowbray, the suburb where I would be staying, which was not too far from the airport. Maria's mother turned out to be a nice person and an interesting conversation partner, and significantly to me, she is the very first person in South Africa to have known me solely as Miriam and never as Brage. I was glad I wasn't completely alone on my first visit to her daughter's house, because I knew that houses in South Africa are subtly different from houses in Norway, and I wanted to make as few mistakes as possible. After all, it wasn't *my* house, and I didn't want to mess things up for Maria. Needless to say, I would still end up making a mess on numerous occasions.

As per the lease agreement, I would rent a room in Maria's house until the end of February. It was to be my interim accommodation until I managed to find something more permanent. The house itself was an old cottage, perhaps a hundred years old, with whitewashed brick walls and brown wooden shutters for the windows. It had been built, I was told,

as a working-class home, in a style resembling the slave cottages of the 19th century. My room was nice and spacious, with a comfortable bed and a shuttered window facing the street. In the cottage there was a living room, a bathroom, Maria's own bedroom, and a sort of laundry room which doubled as storage space for garden furniture and a very large number of five-litre bottles of water, kept in preparation for water shortages. Finally, there was a little courtyard in the back which opened to a small pathway connecting all the cottages on the block. It was a very nice place, and I would often bring a chair out in the courtyard and sit there meditating, watching the stars, or listening to music.

Then came the horrible news. On that very first night after arriving, I received a text from my mother. She had been walking Kira, and there had been an accident involving a car. Our beloved Kira had lost her life. My mother, my brother and my stepfather were all in shock, and my mother was blaming herself. I, for my part, could barely understand what had happened. It all seemed surreal. I had seen Kira the day before, and couldn't imagine her not being there anymore, running around or sleeping behind the curtains.

Although I couldn't really process Kira's death at the time, I did feel deeply sorry for my mother. She had had enough to deal with lately, and she did not deserve *this* on top of everything else. I tried my best to console her, but of course it was only words, and nothing could reverse what had happened. At least she was not alone, I thought; she had my brother and my stepfather, and they would all support each other.

This event made me realize just how far I truly was from my family and from my home country, and it ended up prompting me to focus even more on the here-and-now.

Being back in Cape Town felt both nice and strange. The place was familiar, of course, but at the same time it also felt different, especially since I had made such an all-encompassing change in my life. I had left behind two of the most significant labels I had gone by when I had been here half a year before: My maleness and my name. In a way, rather than me visiting a different place, one might say that the place was meeting a different me. Additionally, when I had left Cape Town the previous August, it had been a teary goodbye with my then-girlfriend, with whom I had broken up in November. It had been a turbulent relationship, and distance and other circumstances had intensified the turbulence to the point where feelings of trust and intimacy had become exhausted on my part. My ex was still living in Cape Town, and although we weren't exactly on hostile terms, I half dreaded passing her on the street every time I went to the supermarket. She had texted me around Christmas, wanting to meet and talk. I had not replied.

Mowbray, where Maria's house is located, is part of Cape Town's Southern Suburbs; the area is mixed in terms of class, colour and culture, and has a long recorded history. The abundance of student residences and apartment buildings, as well as the close proximity to the University of Cape Town and the busy nightlife of Observatory, makes Mowbray a popular area for students. The Mowbray Interchange, tying trains, buses and minibus taxis together, is an important hub for people travelling between the Cape Flats townships (such as Khayelitsha) and the city proper.

In my opinion, the most interesting thing about Mowbray, in particular the upper part on the slopes of Devil's Peak, is

that it's neither a poor nor a rich area. It's not a township, of course, but neither is it a quintessential "leafy suburb". There is Main Road, which passes through upper Mowbray on the way to the city centre and is flanked by shops and businesses – small tuck shops, pubs, fast food places, the Shoprite supermarket, a couple of more posh-looking buildings such as Standard Bank, and a large number of African hair and beauty salons. This busy area, the Mowbray CBD, is the domain of the minibus taxis running between the suburb of Wynberg and the Cape Town Central Business District. Along Main Road, men will constantly shout "Wyn-Wynberg!" or "Cape Tay-own!" from the windows of passing taxis. Branching off from Main Road are various side-streets which are mostly residential, containing small tenement buildings and old cottages like Maria's. The cottages are known as the *Dorp*, as it was the first village-like settlement in what is now Mowbray. On the lower side of the railroad tracks, the houses are a bit bigger and more suburban and guarded by tall fences, but to find the really large houses with high walls around them, you'll have to cross the Liesbeek River.

I arrived at the height of the infamous water crisis. The city of Cape Town had been experiencing a three-year-long drought which had made its consequences felt as early as my previous visit. The situation did not abate, and in early 2018, Cape Town was in the international media limelight as the first major city in the world that might literally run out of water. When the collective levels of the dams feeding Cape Town reached 13.5%, the remaining water would be difficult or impossible to extract for use. At that point – popularly known as "Day Zero" – all municipal water supply to private homes would be turned off, and Cape Town's inhabitants (except, of course, those wealthy enough to drill their own boreholes)

would be forced to gather their water at a small number of municipal distribution points, where individuals could collect no more than 25 litres per person per day, until the dam levels returned to normal.

Day Zero was expected to arrive in mid-April. I knew about this before I arrived, and like everyone else, I was mentally preparing for the day when we'd be carrying water canisters back and forth. This would, of course, be a lifestyle change only for the more affluent urban and suburban residents; the people in the townships have always had to carry their water. On February the 1st, *level 6B* restrictions were put into force, limiting water consumption to 50 litres per person per day. While this was a severe limitation, we still had water flowing in our taps, and I soon learned that 50 litres per day is more than enough to live comfortably.

During my first couple of months in Cape Town, then, my main concern was not my gender identity, nor even my studies; it was water. It was Maria who taught me everything I know about water conservation. She had given me some written instructions even before she left for Macedonia, and after she came back, we cooperated to use as little water as possible in our daily life, to re-use whatever we could, and to gather what little rainwater we got. We acquainted ourselves with the various springs in our area, and we speculated where our nearest water distribution point would be set up in the event of Day Zero. And we hoarded bottled water for as long as the supply lasted. In February, all the major supermarket chains had run out of five-litre water bottles, not only in Cape Town, but in the whole Western Cape province. Apprehension was growing.

What with worrying about water and about my family back home, and trying to settle into Cape Town life and learn the local ways, I was rather disorientated during my first few weeks. I wasn't even sure exactly when the academic semester would start. To fill the holes in my knowledge I soon started spending time at the University of Cape Town's Upper Campus, where the Anthropology Department is located. I met with the Head of Department of Anthropology, who is a very nice and welcoming person and who had no problem whatsoever with my gender situation. I then had my very first supervision meeting, but since I had been very sick the day before and hadn't fully recovered, I had to leave the meeting early, feeling rather embarrassed.

In early February, I attended the compulsory Postgraduate Orientation Day at the Faculty of Humanities, which I found extremely helpful. At the Orientation, although I was an outsider at UCT, I sort of felt like an insider in academia, and an "old fox", as we say in Norwegian, since most of the other students there were Honours and Master's degree students who looked significantly younger than me. I had done my makeup carefully and dressed to make as good an impression as possible, and the result was that when I was sitting in the auditorium listening to the speeches by various senior faculty staff members, I felt secure and confident. It was a good day.

At the time of my arrival in Cape Town, all my friends and acquaintances in the city knew that I was trans and that I preferred to be called Miriam. In retrospect, I can see that being open from the start was a very smart decision, because it helped me get used to my new name and my new role. One of my most supportive friends, Joy Spring, had urged me to keep a journal of my transition process, but I put it off, since I felt

it would be a lot of work at a time when I had enough going on already. When I had met a couple of my neighbours on my first evening in Maria's house, one of them had been kind enough to ask if I preferred to be referred to as "she", to which I said yes, please. Sometime afterwards, that same neighbour urged me to keep a transition journal. Having been given the same advice by two different people now, I decided to go ahead and start writing, and that was how this book was first begun.

My early transition journal is full of entries concerning various instances of *gender dysphoria*. By definition an intrinsic part of every trans person's life, gender dysphoria is described quite aptly by Wikipedia¹ as "the distress a person experiences as a result of the sex and gender they were assigned at birth. In this case, the assigned sex and gender do not match the person's gender identity, and the person is transgender." I had heard about gender dysphoria even before coming out, but I convinced myself that what I was feeling, whatever it was, could not possibly be that. After learning what dysphoria really meant – and learning that it can be of a "social" as well as a "biological" nature, and that it comes in varying degrees of intensity – I understood that I did not lack it but had simply been extremely efficient at repressing it and assigning other causes to my pain.

After I came out, my dysphoria grew more and more intense as I increasingly recognized the various mismatches between my "outside" and my "inside". During my first few months in Cape Town, it reached a high point when I discovered that presenting as female was much more difficult

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_dysphoria (retrieved 23.7.2018); cf. also https://kjonnsinkongruens.no/?page_id=163 (retrieved 23.7.2018)

than I had anticipated. When I said I was a woman, people essentially had to take my word for it. On February the 12th, I vented my frustration in my journal:

Is this common? Dysphoria getting worse, the more you accept and embrace your transness? I look in the mirror and dislike my face. I feel like a car at an auto shop. Broken open, tools lying everywhere, rust, dents, etc. visible for all to see, and most importantly: Halfway fixed, halfway broken. I feel like half a human being. Neither this nor that. I can't introduce myself as Miriam unless I want people to look at me strangely or ask questions. I hate introducing myself as Brage because then I'm pretending to be something I'm not.

The reason for my lack of passability was probably twofold: Firstly, I simply hadn't had enough time to build up a feminine wardrobe yet, and secondly, my hair was extremely short. It wasn't completely bald; that would actually have looked more feminine, as evidenced by the numerous African women who swear to that style. No, my hair was in the process of growing out, rather quickly but still more slowly than I would have wished. The early period was absolutely horrible, and that was when dysphoria first became part and parcel of my daily life. My receding hairline – a tell-tale sign of testosterone – really made it impossible to pass as a cis woman in any context. When my hair eventually did grow a few inches, my problem changed; it wasn't so much my *lack* of hair as the total unkemptness and shapelessness of it, combined with the fact that the thick hair was growing upwards and not yet covering my hairline. I was overjoyed when it had finally become long enough to start covering some of my hairline, and long enough for me to go to the hair salon and get it shaped up a bit. That shape-up resulted in major *gender euphoria*.

Besides waiting for my hair to grow, I also took matters into my own hands and actively pursued feminization in various forms. I went for my first laser appointment the day after I landed in Cape Town. I had booked it in advance, at a clinic in Claremont, as the first of nine sessions on my face and the front of my neck. It was the first step on my path to a female look, and a significant one at that, since the hair removal would be permanent and irreversible. The laser therapist was a very jovial and pleasant young Capetonian woman, and our first session sparked the first of many interesting conversations.

Laser hair removal is painful. The fact that there are no pills or scalpels involved does not make it child's play. The first time wasn't that bad, but the second time was excruciating; I could smell my hairs burning and even heard sounds like the crackle of fire, and I went home with red spots on my cheeks which looked like burn marks. Worried, I contacted the clinic, and they explained that it was just pigment and nothing to worry about. They asked me to come and get some healing gel, and this gel helped the red spots eventually disappear completely. With time, I got used to the crackling and bore the pain as the necessary evil it was.

The interval between the laser sessions increased gradually as part of the programme, but in the beginning, my visits to the clinic were quite frequent; every week and then every other week. They became my first point of routine in my life in Cape Town. The next point of routine was my meetings with my supervisor. Initially we met about every other week, and later on, every week. We met in his office in the Department of Anthropology, at the top floor of the A. C. Jordan Building on Upper Campus. The building is perched near the top of the

Jammie stairs and has an absolutely magnificent view of the Cape Flats and the Hottentots Holland Mountains.

Every meeting would start with my supervisor brewing me a cup of coffee in his Moka pot, the tastiest coffee anywhere in Cape Town. Then we would sit down and talk, and our sessions were open conversations rather than formal supervision meetings. I liked this. I soon started feeling that my supervision meetings at the University of Oslo had been rather formalistic, but then again, I had been at a lower academic level at that time. Although I had been a bit nervous about having been outside academia for more than a year, my supervisor reassured me that I would do just fine, and I tried my best to believe him. The first thing he asked me to do was to read as much as I could about my topic, and so I went to the main university library, brought heaps of books home, and became absorbed in reading.

Shortly after the semester had kicked off, it was time for me to move from Maria's house. It had been a pleasant and memorable stay and we had gotten to know each other well through daily life and various small projects. We had watched President Jacob Zuma's resignation speech on livestream, we had applied for research funds together, and through creative means of water collection we had managed to fill Maria's 1000-litre Jojo tank.

Fortunately, Maria would not disappear from my life. I had spent quite some time looking for a place to stay, but it was difficult to find something affordable close to UCT, and one student flat proprietor actually cut contact with me after I told her I was transgender. Maria was, however, renovating another house she owned, just down the street, and she had told me I could stay there if I could only wait until the start of April. With her help, I found another temporary place to stay, on the same

street, and in a house very much like hers. I didn't even need a car to move my things. I didn't really have much to move anyway, and my heaviest possessions were the library books and my collection of water canisters and bottles – my Day Zero emergency stash, which comprised roughly 90 litres of water, more than half of which was potable.

I had recently met Lisa, a Master's student originally from the United States who had the same supervisor as me. In fact, we met in his office, and it was he who introduced us. Lisa became one of my first friends at UCT, and browsing the stalls of the various clubs and associations that were presenting themselves during Orientation Week, we decided to go to two kickoff parties together. The Underwater Club kickoff party took place on the 22nd of February at the Club's headquarters on Lower Campus. The beer was cheap and the punch was cheaper, and although sweet, it was *very* strong. Anthropologists to the core, Lisa and I spent a long time sitting and observing the other partygoers. People were generally standing in closed groups, which made it difficult for us to do what we had come there for, namely to get to know new people. In the end, Lisa got tired of waiting and suggested we simply break into one of the existing cliques, which we did.

Our strategy was successful. We introduced ourselves to some people who turned out to be very nice, and I soon got into a conversation with an undergraduate student who introduced herself as Laura. We talked about university life and her dreams of studying medicine abroad, perhaps in Canada, and when it turned out she – or at least her family – was from Kenya, we started discussing the culture shocks of living in South Africa. Talking with Laura was pure relief. We vented to each other about how difficult it was to get to know new people, and how even university students seemed to

congregate in racially segregated groups. We were both fed up with constantly being pulled into social games with unspoken rules and expected to take on certain roles based on our skin colour.

I felt like I really bonded with Laura, and I remember feeling sad that such a nice person was going off to Canada. I would have liked to get to know her better. In the end, I decided I wanted to get to know her as well as I could while she was still in South Africa and so I sent her a message on Whatsapp that very same evening before going to bed. She replied. I told her about my gender situation, since I hadn't presented very femininely at the party, and she reacted well to it. For some reason, I found myself nervous. Not because I was uncomfortable with Laura; quite the opposite. I wanted her to be interested in getting to know me, and I was scared I might say something wrong.

The RainbowUCT kickoff party took place the very next day. In honour of the occasion, I had decided to go all out and was wearing a dress, jewellery and my most stunning makeup. After all, we were going to party with other queer people, and I needed to push myself a bit. The party itself, which took place in a classroom in the Mathematics building, was mainly a dance rave with music so loud it was impossible to keep a conversation going. Lisa and I spent most of the time outside, talking and drinking wine. Afterwards, when I got back home and was opening the gate to the house, I managed to trip the beam and set off the alarm. My keys and the remote control being deep in my purse, it took me too long to shut it off, and a few moments later a guard from the alarm company came driving up our street.

The guard asked me who I was, and if I lived in the house. I told him I was renting a room there and that I hadn't received

my copy of the lease contract yet, but I offered to give him my name so he could call the owner and confirm that I was a legitimate tenant. The guard was polite and professional. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir”. As the guard drove away, I felt perplexed, then uncomfortable, then angry. Then, as I finally managed to open the front door, Leo, my landlord’s cat, escaped just as I was opening it! I was distracted for a while, chasing the cat, and at one point I stumbled and knocked my head on a block of concrete. In the end, I managed to catch Leo and bring him safely back inside the house. It would have been a funny scene if anyone had been there to watch.

Shouldn’t it be obvious that someone wearing makeup and a dress and carrying a shoulder purse is not trying to play the part of a man? Being addressed as “sir” in such a context, as a trans woman, is very uncomfortable. The phenomenon is called *misgendering* – the act of addressing or referring to someone as the wrong gender. It’s an interesting paradox that when someone uses the honorific “sir” to address a trans woman,² the effect becomes the opposite of what was intended: It feels like mockery. In rare instances the mockery might be intentional, but in the majority of cases, I believe it’s merely an unintended consequence of the social conventions of politeness. As a sometimes-passable trans woman who gets misgendered quite a lot, I actually prefer my country of origin in this respect, because Norwegian culture does not mandate the use of honorifics. In fact, they are seen as an archaism and are almost never used.

It was not only security guards who would call me “sir”. Employees at supermarkets and cafés would do the same. Even beggars on the street. They were trying to be polite, of course, but the effect was the opposite: They were adding to

² Or “miss”/“ma’am” to a trans man.

the burden of life and contributed to making a simple walk into a tiresome chore. Sometimes the beggars would even call me “boss”, which is worse, since that term is a direct remnant of the Apartheid era. *Die wit man moet altyd baas wees* – “the white man must always remain boss”. That was the tenet of the National Party in the 1950s. Were we still living in Apartheid?

The day after the RainbowUCT party, I decided to make my situation completely clear to all my friends, family members and acquaintances, and posted a status update on Facebook – the social media platform of choice for most Norwegians and most of my non-Norwegian friends as well. I wrote that from now on, I wished to be known as Miriam and “she/her”. The replies I got were supportive, without exception. I guess they’re not called Facebook *friends* for nothing. Some hadn’t known exactly what was going on with me, and were grateful for the clarification. Some had known since the beginning and were expressing admiration and encouragement.

Step by step, I started building up the courage to make a bolder statement with my outward appearance in my everyday life. The water crisis, of course, reduced my opportunities for being very creative with makeup – my supply of water for washing my face was limited – but I made do with little. I also upped my ante in the wardrobe department. In the beginning, it was low-key; my outfit was a t-shirt and trunks plus a few accessories. One day, Maria and I were walking past the corner of Main Road and Station Road, where a small group of men spend most of their time. I was later told that they were drug dealers. As we passed them, I heard one of them call, in a tone of voice that could not be mistaken:

– Looking good!

I made a comment, but I can’t remember exactly what I said. Maria, looking somewhat miserable, perhaps because she

wasn't sure which one of us the guy had been shouting at, made an apologetic reply. After that, I never passed that corner if I could avoid it, unless it was empty of people.

I then tried something similar at UCT Upper Campus. I wore a nondescript dark green t-shirt, a pair of plain black tights and a pair of shoes that were slightly shinier than my regular ones. I put on eye makeup and carried my shoulder bag. As I passed a group of young men and turned to enter the African Studies library, someone called out from behind. I didn't quite catch what they were saying (judging from the tone of voice, it might have been something like "Hey, look at you!"), but it was early morning and campus was practically empty of people, so I was sure that they were calling out at me. That was the second time I had dared to express myself, and the second time I had received unwanted negative attention. Two out of two. Such snide comments are not funny, nor are they innocent; they are social sanctions intended to make the target feel ashamed at their visibility and to convince them that their self-expression marks them out as inferior. Even the tiniest of whistles and the softest of catcalls can be pregnant with oppressive meaning. And make no mistake: The meaning is not lost on the intended victim.

Sometime later, and incidentally while wearing that very same pair of tights, I was looking at a photo exhibition in the foyer of the Psychology building, showcasing stories of Black transgender students at UCT. I read the stories and noted that one of them criticized UCT for not walking the talk regarding LGBTQ+ students' safety and rights. At the time, I couldn't help agreeing. What was the value of good intentions and high-sounding manifestos when trans people were still being harassed in the very heart of the University? More importantly,

what measures would truly ensure trans people's safety in University spaces?

Although I've been called out for looking too much like a man dressing up as a woman, at other times I worry that I don't try hard enough. That my everyday style of clothing is not classically feminine enough, and that I somehow don't deserve the name of woman. But I've started asking myself the question: Why should it not be enough for me, when cis women wear the same stuff all the time? Why can't *I* be myself and express myself through *my* style too? Why do we speak so highly about femininities in the plural when it comes to cis women, only to deprive trans women of the same diversity of choices? Indeed, why can't everyone wear what they like, regardless of sex and gender?

If my first couple of months in Cape Town taught me anything, it is that being trans means constantly working to justify oneself, one way or another.

I cherished the time I got to spend with my friends. Joy Spring's family invited me for shabat dinner as early as my first week and regularly thereafter. Those visits were always relaxing and encouraging; the Spring home was a zone of freedom. Lisa, too, never questioned my gender, and neither did my newfound friend Laura or my old friend Maria. Nomsa, a fellow PhD student at UCT, was herself queer and could see my situation, to a certain degree, from an insider's perspective. My supervisor, too, was always a source of comfort, support and encouragement. I suspect he might have been a little bit put off at first (although he tried his best not to show it), but he relaxed with time and habit.

Nomsa was the first person to consistently call me “she” without making a fuss about it, and the first to ask if I felt uncomfortable when people referred to me as “he”. She and I would sometimes go jogging in Rondebosch Common, a huge open area in the lower end of Rondebosch, about fifteen minutes’ run from my house. It used to be an army campground, but now it’s just a huge grassy field crisscrossed by paths; you might call it a park, but that would underplay the untamedness of the site. To get to Rondebosch Common, I would cross the railroad tracks at Mowbray Station and run down to Liesbeek River, and then southwards along the river for a little while.

The land that is now Mowbray and Observatory used to belong to the Goringhaicona tribe of the Khoi people, for whom the fertile Liesbeek valley used to be an important cattle grazing area. In fact, the Goringhaicona still live in the area – I’ve had the pleasure and honour of getting to know one of their current Chiefs – but they’re marginalized and no longer follow their traditional lifestyle. The Liesbeek River, however, hasn’t been fully domesticated, and a section of it is currently a bird sanctuary.

After running along the Liesbeek for a while, I would take a left turn, running in the direction of the Cape Flats, through the very fancy suburban residential area which I think of as “lower Rondebosch”. At a certain point, suburbia suddenly ends and the grasslands of Rondebosch Common begin. I found it a nice quiet area to jog as well as a good midway point to meet Nomsa, who lived in a different suburb.

Because of the drought, the skies were clear almost every day during February and March, and the evenings were perfect for jogging or taking a long walk. I went for a couple of jogs with Maria as well.

It was still summer and very hot, and I had asked some friends if they would like to join me to the beach in Muizenberg. When the day came – a clear-skied Saturday in early March – everyone except Laura ended up cancelling, but she and I decided to go all the same. We changed our minds about the destination and tried to go to Simon's Town instead, but when it turned out that both rail and road were blocked, we waited at Fish Hoek for the next train to Muizenberg. We found a nice spot on the crowded beach and relaxed in the afternoon sun. While I went for a long swim, Laura stayed ashore, reading and dozing.

At the beach I reverted, in a sense, to presenting as male. Since I have no breasts and since my body is the wrong shape and full of hair, it is next to impossible for me to pass as female unless most of my body is covered. Thus, when swimming, I still wore a simple pair of trunks. I'm not sure when I'll be brave enough to put on a swimsuit, but it will probably require a full body-wax and the company of very supportive friends.

In spite of all this, I enjoyed my swim at Muizenberg and felt no dysphoria. I've always loved the ocean and feel a strong affinity to it, having been a certified scuba diver since I was eleven years old. And while I'm inside the water, nobody can see my body anyway, so in a sense, the ocean was helping me. I was the only one who was swimming out in the deep water, and a surfer swam up to me and warned me about sharks. After all, the infamous Seal Island, where great white sharks literally jump out of the water to catch their prey, is very close to Muizenberg. I wasn't too afraid of the sharks, though, and spent more time in the deep, enjoying the feeling of being alone with nature.

After my swim, I lay next to Laura for a long time, reading a book and watching her sleep. Like the ocean, Laura drove

away worries and dysphoria and made me feel at peace. I found myself admiring her good looks; her skin, the shape of her body, the wild beauty of her hair. And not only was she beautiful; she was also intelligent, worldly wise and well read, and we had a lot in common. I felt an urge to reach out, touch her... hold her?

No, I told myself. I can't risk this friendship by allowing myself to think such thoughts.

Later on, we went to a café and sat down in the shade for a while. It felt good to have a break from the sun which was still blazing even though it was late afternoon. I remember Laura ordering something exotic that I had never seen before: A cup of hot chocolate made with *white* chocolate. After drinking and talking for a while, we went back home on the train; Laura got off in Rosebank and I got off at Mowbray station. It had been a wonderful time, and my mood was great.

There had been a lot of people at the beach that day, and as I arrived home, I received a text from my ex who had seen me there. There was no hiding now; she knew I was in Cape Town, and I finally agreed to meet her. It would be for the best. She needed closure, she said, and perhaps I needed it too. At any rate, it wasn't constructive to go around being nervous about bumping into her on the street. We decided to meet at a café in Rondebosch.

Our meeting went very well. It felt like reconnecting with an old friend, and of course, in many ways that was exactly what it was. We had a drink and updated each other on what had happened since last time. Somehow she had gotten wind that I had come out as trans. A strong activist for oppressed communities, my ex was nothing but supportive. In fact, she wasn't too surprised at the development; she was, after all, the one who had asked me long ago if I wanted to be a girl. She

was living not too far away from me, and as we parted, we decided to stay on friendly terms.

At the time, I was working hard on my solitary project of writing up my research proposal, which I would be presenting to the ethics committee at the end of August. It was only March and still very early, and the road to becoming a transgender academic looked like it was going to be a lonesome process. There are, of course, others who have made the same journey, like Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, but I did not learn about her until later.

The desk in my room was chock-full of books I had borrowed from the university library, and I spent my days reading and writing. I read hundreds of pages every week, perhaps thousands – I didn't really keep track. My diligence drew impressed comments from my landlord. Some days I would sit for twelve or thirteen hours with very few breaks – not a healthy habit, but my subject captivated me so much that I forgot about anything else. Most of the books I was reading were works that my supervisor had recommended, and among them were several novels. Having been in a tired and high-strung state for much of the previous two years, I'd almost stopped reading fiction since it brought unwelcome negative emotions and amplified the ones I already had. However, now that I had been given an outside incentive, I found that I enjoyed the novels immensely, and I realized that my coming-out had improved my emotional resilience.

One particular writer who really made an impression on me was Amos Tutuola from Nigeria. His novels emphasize the incomplete nature of human identity, a concept to which I could readily relate. Francis Nyamnjoh, whose works I was also reading, had turned Tutuola's idea of incompleteness into a concept of anthropological theory which I found to be a very

useful analytical lens through which to view the topic of my own project – white identity in the context of geographical race-segregation. But in addition, reflecting on incompleteness gave me personal comfort and made me more confident in the transgender identity which is – perhaps like all human identities – in its essence *incomplete*. I had stripped myself down to the bare bones of humanness, and like the heroes of Tutuola's stories, I was activating myself, my femaleness, using *juju* of various sorts. Laser treatment; was it not a *juju*? My growing hair? *Juju*! I was not merely a victim of chance; I was taking the bull by its horns, shaping my life and my future by my actions; not in solitude, but always in reciprocal relationships with the people around me.

I felt thankful for being introduced to these ideas, so commonsensical yet beyond anything I had learned before. Who would have imagined that incompleteness could be so empowering?

Maria's other cottage was nearing completion, and I came with her several times during the month of March to look at the progress. The renovation was coming along very nicely, and I was looking forward to moving in at the beginning of April. It would be great to finally have a space that was my own – my current accommodation was very pleasant, but I was sharing a rather small space with my landlord and his wife and their two cats. The only challenge was to find someone to share the cottage with me, since there were two rooms and renting the whole cottage would be far too expensive for me. I tried to help Maria with this, and found a couple of prospective

tenants, but for various reasons, none of them ended up taking the offer. We kept looking.

I was spending much time at UCT, reading and researching and meeting with my supervisor and Nomsa. The snide comment I got early on turned out, fortunately, to be a one-off occurrence; it never happened again. I started enjoying Upper Campus more. It's a beautiful and imposing place, still with more than a touch of coloniality about it, even though the statue of Cecil Rhodes has fallen. The buildings are old and sturdy, built to last forever, and at the centre lies Jameson Memorial Hall, framed by Devil's Peak in the background. There's a great deal of symbolism to the placement of Upper Campus; its position high up on the mountainside, looking down on the Cape Flats far below. Seen from the Cape Flats, UCT looks a bit like a huge palace or a Tibetan monastery.

Little by little, I came to realize that all of UCT's main campuses – Lower, Middle and Upper – beautiful and imposing though they were, had a shared weakness in regard to transgender accommodation: The toilets. The “bathroom issue” is an important issue for trans people that is often brought up in public debates. Going to a male or female restroom as a transgender person can be a difficult experience. If you are a trans woman going into a ladies' room, your worst fear is for someone to react to your presence and call you out, or worse, *chase* you out as a potential molester or peeping Tom. The same is true for trans men visiting men's rooms. It gets even worse if there are cleaners inside, since they effectively have the power to grant or deny entry into the restrooms. Lingering a little too long outside the door of a ladies' room might well earn me a hard stare from the cleaner inside, which is usually enough for me to give up entering altogether. The alternative, of course, is to go to the men's room, which is both

an act of denial of one's gender identity as well as a risky endeavour, since men might also react strongly to seeing someone in their bathroom who is dressed as a woman. Indeed, for someone who identifies as a woman, walking into a men's room is trespassing!

Even these problems are dwarfed in comparison to those of gender nonbinary people – people who identify as neither male nor female. Trans men and trans women have restrooms that are at least *nominally* theirs; nonbinary people have no place to go whatsoever.

Where, then, is one supposed to go to relieve oneself? I had read somewhere that there was supposed to be a gender-neutral restroom somewhere on Upper Campus; I had even read a notice from RainbowUCT about the bathroom sign being vandalized. However, it would take six months for me to actually *find* this bathroom. When Nomsa tried to help me, we ended up outside a ladies' room which Nomsa believed to have been reconverted from gender-neutral. I wonder why they would do such a thing. Even the disabled rooms – often used by transgender people as a gender-neutral alternative – are sometimes divided by gender, and when they're not, it's not uncommon to find the door locked and hung with a strict sign saying *Disabled people ONLY*.

I eventually found my favourite restrooms: A disabled room at the far end of campus which was neither locked nor policed, and a couple of rarely used restrooms in the same building as our Anthropology department. I sometimes have to walk long distances to get to these restrooms, but it's worth it.

The end of March was a tough period. In spite of the great things that were happening in my life, I had become mentally and emotionally tired from the accumulation of many small inconveniences and stress factors – the snide comments, the bathroom issue, the practicalities of moving house, family issues back in Norway, the struggle of making sure my friends and family were on the same page as me, and the fact that a political battle was going on in Norway about access to hormone replacement therapy (HRT). My long working days and intense reading and writing also took its toll. On March 29th I had an online conversation with an old friend of mine, Vigdis, which ended with me reacting angrily to the way she was talking to me and the way I felt she was expecting me to share deeply personal thoughts and feelings with her, but sharing little in return. She became angry too, and withdrew. Afterwards, I wrote the following entry in my journal:

At one point, I told Vigdis I had really weak dysphoria. This is not true. I don't know why I said it, perhaps I've been feeling that no, dysphoria is something other people are feeling, not me, simply because I don't feel like I'm "good enough", like it's something to be sorry for and I don't deserve that kind of sympathy. After all, I've managed so well as a man for so long...

That's the main reason I refuse to go to NBTS [Norway's national treatment centre for transsexualism]. They'll say 'you've done so well as a man up until now, you can keep doing that for the rest of your life'. Or maybe even: "You're not trans, you're delusional".

NBTS have taken legal steps against private alternative providers of HRT in Norway. They have written a very problematic piece in Aftenposten, which has spawned reactions from the Minister

of Health, sexologists, and the trans community. I hope NBTS' monopoly is going down now, finally.

When my dysphoria is bad, I understand why some trans people get depressed and even suicidal. And I wonder how I became so good at suppressing my own pain, because I can feel it, it is strong, but I sort of put it on hold and live life in a very stressed and superficial manner, not really feeling properly, not really living. I must stop that. Maybe the fact that I am writing this down will help.

My mother has been even more supportive lately, which I appreciate. She has actually started to refer to me as transgender when talking about me with others, and referring to me as "Brage Miriam". My father too, is more supportive. Perhaps he has understood that this is not a phase? I mentioned I was stressed about going to Norway for May 17th and [my stepfather's] birthday, not knowing what to wear. He forwarded a tip from [his wife] that I should go for a Diane Keaton look. My father has been a bit sceptical towards my transition, I think this is the first time he has actively been supportive of me dressing femininely.

My friend Ina (Facebook conversation) helped me with my dysphoria. It is good to talk to her. Also, the fact that everyone is so supportive and uses my chosen name Miriam also helps. There are many nice things to think about. I just hate being in this limbo. I hate feeling non-existent.

Then, some days later, I snapped.

I had just moved to Maria's cottage and had given her some help in the process, moving the fridge and some other furniture. We were still looking for prospective tenants – housemates for me – but had had little luck so far. I had spent the day at Upper Campus, in a meeting where I was introduced to two new people. I was introduced as Brage and had to explain my situation to one of them afterwards. Not that I was

told that I had to, but I *felt* I had to. At that time, I'd still sometimes find myself saying "I'm Brage, but I'm in gender transition, and I go by Miriam". I'd feel pressured, as I wrote in my journal, to "open my soul to total strangers just to be 'allowed' to be addressed and seen as who I am, simply because I don't 'pass' well enough" (the kind of self-exposure that Raewyn Connell³ recognizes as part and parcel of all trans women's experiences). I had slept badly the night before, and when I finally left campus, I felt exhausted and looked forward to being able to relax and recharge and, most importantly, to be completely alone, not having to introduce or explain myself to any more people.

Coming home, I found the door unlocked and knew Maria would be inside. Then I heard voices talking, and I knew that something was going on. It turned out Maria was having an unannounced house-viewing. She introduced me to the guest – a young man who seemed nice enough – and told him my name was Miriam. I shook his hand and said "Nice to meet you", grateful that Maria had done the introduction. She asked me if I was okay. I was surprised, because I had tried to keep up as energetic an appearance as possible; I apologized and said I was just tired, and that I needed to go into my room. Then I closed the door behind me, threw myself on the bed, and immediately fell asleep.

When I woke up, Maria and the man had gone, but I saw that she had sent me a Whatsapp text asking me how I was doing. She was worried and told me I had seemed really distressed and uncomfortable. After reflecting on it for a while, I wrote back to her, explaining what had happened, and apologizing for seeming rude. I felt bad, because I always do

³ <http://www.raewynconnell.net/2012/07/transsexual-women.html> (retrieved 30.8.2018)

my best to be polite. I knew that renting out this room was extremely important to Maria, and I hoped I hadn't created any problems for her.

It took several hours to unwind after the experiences of that day. I continued texting with Maria and some other friends and was supported by them all; they assured me I wasn't obliged to explain or defend my identity or choice of name. Deep down, of course, I knew very well that it was true, but the situation was still new and difficult to deal with, and I was learning everything as I went along. Looking back on this incident, and on that period as a whole, I see it as a necessary step in the process of getting used to my new life. After that horrible day, I started becoming more comfortable with introducing myself simply as Miriam, and I began to care less about the opinions of strangers – and even old friends.

Not long after this episode, Maria did find tenants for the other room – a lesbian couple who turned out to be wonderful people. I had been somewhat nervous that I'd get a conservative person as my housemate, and I was very glad that my new housemates were queer like me. They're about my age, they're both local, and they're both native speakers of isiXhosa, the most prominent African language in the Cape Town area. IsiXhosa, a Bantu language of the Nguni branch spoken natively by slightly more than eight million people, is probably most famous to non-South Africans as the language of Miriam Makeba's *The Click Song (Qongqothwane)*, and the home language of Nelson Mandela.

Laura and I were spending more time together, and I realized I was starting to develop a serious crush on her. But what was I to do? She was certainly heterosexual, and even if

by some chance she wasn't, she would certainly not be attracted to *me*. I was neither here nor there. Caught in limbo. A circus animal!

I invited several people over for a house-warming, but only Laura ended up coming. We sat in the lounge area of the cottage, a nice room painted in bright colours and with a big window facing the street. It was nice. We had coffee and we talked. I relished her company, and my feelings – and the misery of knowing she couldn't possibly be feeling the same – grew stronger. After she left, I knew I would have to tell her. I wouldn't be able to maintain normal friendly relations while feeling the way I did, and in any case, I would be deceiving her by keeping my feelings hidden.

So, I wrote to her, told her the truth, and braced myself for a broken friendship.

It took a while for her to reply.

A long while. And then her text came through:

“I thought it was just me”.

Chapter 3: Stepping up

In South Africa, my foreignness reveals itself through various little everyday frictions and cultural misunderstandings, but most of all through language. Although English is only one of South Africa's eleven official languages, and despite the fact that only 9.6% of the South African population speak it at home,⁴ it has a special and very central position in South African society both as an inter-ethnic lingua franca and as the main language of education, science and culture. I've often felt that in South Africa, native-borns as well as foreigners are very much judged by the way they speak English.

Norwegian and English, both being Germanic languages (North Germanic and West Germanic, respectively), share historical roots and have much in common. However, there are also some major differences. Norwegian, for example, is one of the very few European languages that do not conjugate verbs according to person and number. Consequently, it's easy for a Norwegian, her mind focused on more urgent matters, to fall into such slips of the tongue as "all my friends was there" or "it's no more eggs in the fridge". Although innocent and in no way detrimental to communication, my feeling is that such linguistic imperfections rarely go unnoticed in South Africa.

Showing a less-than-perfect command of English immediately brands you as different. Different is not necessarily bad, of course. Many have commented on my accent and my occasional mess-ups with an air of curiosity about where I come from, and it has often been an ice-breaker

⁴ <http://www.medioclubsouthafrica.com/landstatic/80-languages> (retrieved 12.7.2018)

and a conversation-starter. It's only very rarely that someone, by the tiniest movement of their eyebrows or a silence lasting just a microsecond too long, has managed to make me feel just a little bit *stupid* for saying I'll be "cleaning" my clothes instead of "washing" them,⁵ or for a slightly unorthodox pronunciation of the *i* in *shirt*!

While my accent had gradually become "better", i.e. less noticeable (I had started resorting, now and then, to imitating an Afrikaans accent and found it very helpful), and while my self-consciousness about language had become less bothersome than it was in the beginning, it was still something of a relief to take a break from English and go back to speaking my native Norwegian for a couple of weeks in May. My stepfather was celebrating his sixtieth birthday, a big occasion, and most of our extended family – my mother's and my stepfather's – would be there. It would be a nice opportunity to touch base after four months in South Africa, and to reconnect friends and family.

However, I was also nervous. I would be presenting as female for all these people for the very first time. Some of them were people I hadn't talked to at all since my coming-out. How would they react? It was my stepfather's big day and I didn't want to steal the show. I also didn't want to feel pressured into going back to "male mode", and I had therefore tried to subtly prepare my mother in advance by talking to her about clothes, shoes and other things that were on my mind. Her demeanour reassured me, and I looked forward to going back home, albeit with some trepidation. My brother and I were supposed to say a few words during dinner, and although I'm good with words, I have never enjoyed public speaking.

⁵ A true story. The Norwegian language makes no distinction between the two terms.

Laura came with me to the airport and saw me off. We had officially been a couple for just over one month. I appreciated her being with me, and was sad to leave, but we told each other that two weeks would be bearable. Then I went into the X-ray line, and a little while later I was sitting on the plane to Addis Abeba, where I would transit.

I arrived in Oslo on May 16th and was picked up by my stepfather. The weather was hot and sunny. It felt great to be back, and very relaxing; later that evening I saw my mother, my brother, his girlfriend and her child again. We had dinner outside, and we drank cold beer. Although it was only May, it felt like the summer holidays.

Saturday came – the 19th of May – and I was hoping for the best and bracing for the worst. Our family members arrived. Many had not seen each other for a long time. They greeted me without any awkwardness. It felt good. I was wearing a dress that my mother had given me; it was so different from wearing a suit; I didn't just tolerate it, I actually *liked* it. Was this possible? Feeling completely at ease in a formal situation like this? It was possible, and it was happening. Talking to my cousins and my aunts and uncles did not feel weird at all. It felt natural. Some of them, like my stepfather's older brother, even asked me sincere questions about my situation and the process of socially transitioning. I appreciated it very much. Why speculate and assume, when you can get the answer by asking directly? I don't think any trans person will reject a question asked out of goodwill and sincerity.

It was a very good day. Even the speech went well.

During the rest of my visit to Norway, I travelled to Gjøvik to meet my father and my grandparents and spent a night in Oslo where I reconnected with several good friends. I also visited the trade union, for which I was still working long-

distance, and said hi to my colleagues. I felt confident in my femaleness now; the whole stay in Norway was a confidence boost as well as a much-needed break from daily life in Cape Town – a true vacation. At the end, I felt renewed and ready to begin a new step of my personal journey. I knew that I had the backing of my whole family, and I knew my family was doing well. In particular, I was happy to have seen my mother again, and to have spoken to her face to face about the various things that had happened to her since I had left. My mother gave me some of her old clothes, which I appreciated very much, both because the clothes were beautiful, but most of all because I truly bonded with her as a woman for the first time.

I had, ironically, failed in my attempt to get myself a cup of coffee at the airport in Addis Abeba, the capital of the homeland of coffee. Now I was half-asleep in my seat high above the half-desert known as the Karoo. I was flying south again. I was looking forward to seeing my friends, and of course Laura, who had missed me too and came to meet me at the airport when I arrived. What was more, the general atmosphere of water-related stress had abated somewhat. Western Cape farmers had cut their water consumption, and Day Zero had been called off, at least in 2018. Level 6B water restrictions were still in place, however, and were likely to remain so until the dams were 85% full.

There were also some challenges waiting. Before I left for Norway, I had discovered mould on one of my walls. The wall had not yet been fixed by the time I got back, but a damp-specialist came by when both Maria and I were present, and it turned out that the mould in the wall was due to the fact that

water had been pouring through cracks, either in the neighbour's wall or in the roofing on our house, and accumulating inside the brick wall itself, saturating it. When, shortly after, my ceiling started leaking, I was convinced that there must indeed be something wrong with the roof.

The winter rains were starting, and I lived with a dripping ceiling for a while, but Maria eventually arranged to have the roof fixed. The mould, too, would disappear with time, as the wall slowly dried up. The damp-specialist had told me that I would have to clean my wall with a strong fungicide once a month until the white spots stopped returning. I used Jik, the ubiquitous South African bleach, often mixed with Handy Andy, the ubiquitous cleaning cream. Sometimes, when I felt extra antagonistic towards the fungus, I would apply the Jik pure and undiluted on a rag or a ball of toilet paper.

As everyday life resumed, so did the meetings with my supervisor. I had submitted an abstract for the 2018 Anthropology Southern Africa (ASnA) conference which would take place at the University of Botswana in September, and I had been selected to present. In other words, over the next few months I would be writing out the paper for the ASnA conference in addition to finishing my research proposal. Being chosen to present at the conference was a great honour and a major academic confidence boost. So were my supervisor's very encouraging comments on my proposal drafts. It felt as if my hard work and intense reading were paying off, and that I had truly returned to the world of anthropology and was earning my place as a PhD candidate. An additional encouragement came when I received word that my very first peer-reviewed paper, published in the autumn of 2017 in the Norwegian Journal of Anthropology, had been

placed on the reading list of a course at Oslo Metropolitan University.

On the 7th of June, news broke⁶ that Café Manhattan, a popular LGBTQ+ restaurant and bar in Cape Town, had received a bomb threat. Queer venues in Cape Town had been bombed before, once in 1999 and once in 2000.

This time, nothing happened.

My research proposal was due to be presented to the ethics committee on August 21st. It was nearing completion, and I spent June reading a few more books, adding a few more references, and improving the language ever so slightly here and there. I felt a bit tired after the long semester and found myself working more slowly than before. The undergraduate students were on holiday, but a PhD candidate does not really have holidays. I actually enjoyed being on Upper Campus during the winter break; the crowds were gone and the place was very quiet. The only sad part was that Laura was not in Cape Town. Her residence has a policy of renting out students' rooms during the holidays, and Laura was not allowed to stay. She would travel to her family in a different part of the country and stay there for four weeks. It would be a very long time to be away from each other, but like last time, we told each other we would manage.

⁶ <http://www.mambaonline.com/2018/06/07/shock-as-cape-town-gay-venue-hit-by-homophobic-bomb-threat/> (retrieved 19.8.2018)

After Laura had left, I went to do my hair for the second time. The salon was in Sea Point, somewhat extravagantly far away from Mowbray, but I felt comfortable there and felt like I had gotten to know the hairdresser quite well. Instead of taking an expensive Uber all the way home, I decided to stroll along the seashore for a while and enjoy the view. The weather was beautiful, the sun looking down through a sparsely clouded sky; it had recently been storming, and the waves were still large and very strong, breaking long before reaching shore and crashing heavily down on the rugged cliffs. If I had gone swimming there, I would surely have broken all my bones. I liked watching the sea; in bustling Mowbray one doesn't often get to feel that close to nature.

I felt comfortable and relaxed, and good-looking after having my hair cut. I started to swing my hips as I walked. A bakkie came driving up from behind with some people sitting at the back, and when one of the guys whistled at me, I knew I wasn't being called out for being trans; I was getting sexual attention for being a good-looking, confident woman. The incident gave me mixed feelings. As I wrote in my journal, "I know it's not okay, but at that particular moment I felt it to be validating."

The 18th of June 2018 was an important day in transgender history. The World Health Organization announced the release of the new International Classification of Diseases: the ICD-11. In the ICD-11, "transsexualism" had been renamed "gender incongruence" and moved from the mental illnesses section to a section on sexual health. It had been a long time coming, of course. The media was agog, saying that

“transgender is no longer a mental disorder”. What the WHO were really doing, of course, was admitting that it had never been one.

Homosexuality used to be classified as a mental disorder too, in the WHO’s ICD-9 of 1977. In the ICD-10, which was released in 1990, homosexuality was removed. 1990 was the year I was born. The ICD-10 was first used by member states of the WHO in 1994 – within my living memory, just like the fall of Apartheid. There are two main lessons to learn from this. Firstly, that gay inclusion is a relatively new phenomenon in world history, and secondly, that transgender inclusion is lagging three decades behind.

I now realize that I was one of the last people in the world to come out as trans while transness was still officially seen by the medical establishment as a disease. I’m sure that the knowledge that the ICD-11 was coming was one (subconscious) part of the reason why I dared to come out without even trying to get diagnosed with transsexualism. I knew that psychiatrists would soon lose their powers as gatekeepers of gender identity. This development did not happen of its own accord, of course; it happened because of decades of hard work done by activists all over the world, activists such as Jeanette Solstad Remø and many others. Although not all trans people wish to be activists themselves, or even to connect with a trans community, it is important that we all acknowledge our debts to those who have gone before us. Without their efforts, we would still be sick in the eyes of cis society; we would be less than invisible.

It is also important to remember that freedom is never guaranteed to last, and rights – no matter how basic, no matter how self-evident they may seem – can always be taken away.

June turned into July, and I found myself in an airplane yet again. My father was coming to South Africa with his wife and two friends to go on a safari in the north-eastern part of the country. I was not joining them on the safari, but I would be meeting them in Johannesburg for a day tour of Soweto and a visit to the Apartheid Museum. I had never been to Johannesburg before, and I looked forward to seeing my father again, even if only for a day. There was a certain significance to meeting them in South Africa and not in Norway. I had been living in South Africa for almost six months and felt like I had settled in quite well, and in spite of all the little things that annoyed me about South African society, it felt almost like I was, in a way, welcoming them to *my* country. It is strange, this thing they call belonging.

On the morning of Saturday July 7th, I was sitting outside my little hotel bungalow drinking instant coffee and waiting for my father and the others to arrive. When they finally came, I was in the bathroom! It was nice to see them again, and although they had just come from a very long flight, they were happy to have arrived, and looked like they were enjoying the place. I certainly was. It was a rather luxurious hotel with small semi-detached bungalows instead of regular hotel rooms, all facing a quiet and spacious garden. Most importantly for me, who was used to Cape Town, there was no water crisis in Gauteng Province, and I could take long, hot showers.

We were picked up by our tour guide at twelve o'clock. She was a tomboyish-looking woman at about forty years of age, and she drove her own white minibus. It was a very nice and interesting tour. We first went into Soweto and had a look at some historical places there (such as the Hector Pietersen

memorial), and we ended the day at the Apartheid Museum. When we had lunch at the Museum, I passed in public once again; the waiter served me first, saying “Ladies first”.

Although the tour guide misgendered me consistently and very conspicuously, referring to me as “the gentleman in the back”, I chose not to complain, because I liked her and because I didn’t want to make a scene during the one day I had with my father. The guide might have chosen her words deliberately, as a joke, since my manner of dress was obviously not very gentlemanly. Or perhaps it wasn’t that obvious?

Even though the tour guide was engaging and well-informed, she did share a few facts about South Africa which I found rather questionable. If the Afrikaans language is moving towards extinction, as the guide claimed, it certainly has many good years left. After all, it’s still the main language of the Western Cape and very prominent in Cape Town itself. And the guide’s assertion that the *whole* public transportation system in South Africa has collapsed completely was patently untrue. So was her assertion that all trains are inherently dangerous. I challenged her, telling her that I sometimes do use the local trains in Cape Town, and that there are certain lines that are more dangerous than others; they’re not all the same. Although I do take the train to Muizenberg, I never take the train to Khayelitsha, since even the locals there have advised me not to.

– You’re fine then, she said, – because you’ve learned from the locals.

Well, she’s a local too, a born-and-bred South African although her parents were immigrants from Britain. Safety is an issue everywhere in South Africa, but why paint the situation as even more extreme than it actually is? Although it’s certainly not intentional in the majority of cases, I’ve found

that the discourse of safety in South Africa often seems to have the effect of scaring white people away from predominantly non-white spaces (which include public transportation), thereby contributing to the naturalization and perpetuation of racial segregation.

My father knocked on my door at six o'clock the next morning to say a proper goodbye. They were leaving at 06:15 to drive to a game park further northeast. I would miss my father's company, but apart from that, I wasn't actually too bothered about not joining them on their safari. During my time in Kenya I had seen four of the Big Five game animals (all except the leopard), as well as giraffes, hippos, various apes, and many other animals besides. The word *safari*, of course, is a loan from Swahili where it simply means a journey; any journey. I would also be going on a safari, then – in the literal sense – and I would see beautiful landscapes too, but from a train carriage instead of an automobile.

Yes, I was going back to Cape Town by train. I had booked my Shosholozha Meyl sleeper class ticket a month in advance, and I looked forward to enjoying the scenery and meeting new people. Most of all, I was looking forward to the experience of travelling as a woman with other women. The train company had proven themselves to be trans-friendly; as soon as I told them about my situation, they automatically placed me in a women's compartment. The journey would, in many ways, be a kind of *rite of passage* into the world of women. Would they accept me?

I had breakfast at the hotel and packed my things, and at 09:45, I was putting the finishing touch on my appearance. I had shaved more closely than I had ever done before; I had applied generous amounts of concealer on my ingrown hairs and the various spots on my skin; I had freshened up my

eyebrows, and I had made sure my hairband fit perfectly. I did not put on eye makeup, out of fear that it would smudge. The train would not be the best place to redo my makeup, even if the carriages did have restrooms with mirrors.

It had never been more important for me to look feminine. I mean, of course, I always prefer to look feminine, but in this case, it was a matter of necessity. After all, I didn't want to cause discomfort to my compartment-mates, or, for that matter, to myself. I didn't really care if my fellow passengers could tell I wasn't biologically female; what mattered was that they could see that I was serious about *presenting* as female and sharing the life-world of women. Although I might seem odd, I wouldn't seem like a trespasser or a threat.

The ticket, which I collected at Park Station in Johannesburg – incidentally the largest and most imposing railway station I've ever seen in my life – read as follows:

Board: JOHANNESBURG

Date: Sun 8 Jul 2018 12:30

JOHANNESBURG (PARK) STATION

Dest: CAPE TOWN STATION

Date: Mon 9 Jul 2018 15:30

CAPE TOWN STATION FORESHORE

Adult (S #: 102 C #: 10 C: A TC: TOURIST)

MRS B PEDERSEN

At just past 12 o'clock, Mrs Pedersen boarded the train. The trip would be a long one, 27 hours if everything went as planned. The distance between Johannesburg and Cape Town is 1400 kilometres – slightly shorter than the distance between London and Budapest, or slightly longer than the distance between Boston and Chicago. South Africa is a big country.

I found someone already sitting in my compartment, a middle-aged woman who spoke to me in Afrikaans. I had to ask her to speak English instead. Although my knowledge of German (and, to a lesser extent, Dutch) enables me to *read* quite a bit of Afrikaans, understanding the spoken language is a wholly different matter, and I can't speak it back. The woman did know English, although her accent was heavy; then again, so was mine. She told me that she worked in Johannesburg for a white family who had gone to Mauritius on holiday, and she was going home to see her children. I didn't learn exactly what kind of work she did, but from the way she spoke about her employers, it seemed to be of a domestic nature.

I opened my little bag of biltong and offered her some. She accepted. The train had started rolling out of Johannesburg city and out into the open landscape, dotted with hills which were not really hills but gravel-heaps from the old gold mines that have given the province its name; in the Sesotho language, Gauteng means "place of gold".

I was making intermittent notes in my journal:

A man comes in with the bedsheets I paid for. He asks if we are family. "Isn't it awkward to be travelling like this?" I explain that more people will be coming into the compartment at later stations.

I look at the woman, shrugging, I look at the savanna, thinking about the book I am reading, and wondering what the people back home are really thinking about me being in South Africa.

Sometimes I feel I'm the only person who understands the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one who doesn't.

There is a scent in the air, a scent of grass and cows, a farm smell, like the farm where I worked many years ago. Those are good memories. But there is something disquieting about these burnt fields

and ruined houses along the tracks. Although farmed, this land seems wild. Awe-inspiring. Endless. I think of Laura.

We pass ruined buildings whose function I do not understand. This always gives me a sense of strangeness as if on another planet.

The landscape we were moving through is historically known as the Transvaal, which means “the land beyond the Vaal river”. There used to be several such place-names in South Africa, referring to rivers as boundaries between here and beyond. Transkei, for example, and its opposite, Ciskei. The Latin prefixes *trans-* and *cis-* are exactly the same as those used to describe gender identities. In a sense, then, being transgender can be likened to crossing to the other side of a river. I find it a fitting metaphor. It even captures the diversity of trans experiences: Sometimes crossing the river can be as easy as crossing a bridge, but sometimes you must swim, perhaps through dangerous currents, and there may be crocodiles.

My compartment-mate and I went to bed early, turning off the lights and allowing our compartment to be illuminated only by the clear, starry sky. And all the time listening to the sound of the wheels against the track joints:

Kan-ka-dum. Kan-ka-dum.

At Warrenton station, two Afrikaner girls entered the compartment; they seemed to be around Laura’s age. They quickly went to sleep, deciding to share one bed and placing their luggage in the other. A little while later, we were awoken by a knock on the door. The train manager, a large, middle-aged man who looked tough, like a stereotypical Afrikaner farmer, told us we had arrived at the station where the middle-aged woman was getting off. It was a tiny town in the middle of the wilderness, not too far from Kimberley.

I went back to sleep but woke up at intervals; the compartment was freezing, and even though I was fully clothed and lying underneath a thick woollen blanket, I envied the two girls who shared a bed. There was snow in the air outside.

Kan-ka-*dum*. Kan-ka-*dum*.

The train manager came knocking again in the morning, informing us that a lorry had fallen on to the tracks somewhere ahead, and that we would be standing still for an unknown amount of time. He spoke in Afrikaans (what was that about a dying language?) and then repeated the information in English at my request. I looked out the window; the sun was rising over a railway station through a partly cloudy sky, and a sign on the platform said “*BE F RT WEST*”.

I left the carriage, walked down the platform toward the main station building, saw the train manager and asked him if it was possible to get a cup of coffee anywhere; he told me there was a dining carriage further back, so I went there and had breakfast; then I went back outside.

We waited for a long time. A Dutch dance troupe which was travelling on our train went out on the platform and started performing their routine. I watched them for a while, then continued strolling up and down the platform. Casting a glance at the carriages towards the rear and observing the passengers who were climbing in and out of them, I felt sorry for them – they were in *sitter class* and had no beds but had to sit in one seat for the duration of the journey. Unsurprisingly, I did not see a single white face among the sitter-class passengers. The train manager had mentioned that they numbered more than two hundred.

I spent most of our waiting time reading *Married But Available*, a novel by Francis Nyamnjoh. I also got to know the

two Afrikaner girls, who turned out to be students who had been visiting their parents in Northwest Province for the holidays. I then sat with some of the train staff for a while, a pair of forceful women who were speaking in isiXhosa and sometimes in English, commenting on the situation and the passengers. And then, after ten hours at Beaufort West, the train finally started to move again.

A new woman had settled in our compartment. At first, I thought she might be Xhosa, but then I understood that her native language was Afrikaans. She was a very quiet person and did not seem bothered by me in any way. We talked a few times, but not much.

It was four o' clock in the afternoon when the train resumed its journey, and the clouds gradually parted as we moved west. The evening sun was bright and lit up a landscape that was very different from anything I had seen before. We were in the Great Karoo. I had been in semi-arid zones before, when I worked in Lunga-Lunga on the South Coast of Kenya. That, however, had been a different landscape. Here, there were huge open swaths of land without a single tree or even a single small bush. We could see hills that were probably tens, perhaps hundreds of kilometres away.

Desolated. Unfamiliar. Indeterminate. Mysterious. Liminal.

As we moved through the empty Karoo landscape, the clacking of the wheels against the tracks seemed to echo into nothingness.

Kan-ka-*dum*.

Two cows.

Kan-ka-*dum*.

A lonely house.

Kan-ka-*dum*.

Vast, open spaces with no end.

The Afrikaner girls had found themselves another compartment. The train manager and his assistant were showing some puzzlement over my placement, and the latter commented somewhat apologetically to me that the girls “had also been placed in the wrong compartment”.

Wrong compartment? The comment might have triggered dysphoria, but it didn't. You don't know anything, I thought. The woman in the seat facing me did not seem to mind my presence, and I preferred to lie quietly and read or look out the window. The sun was setting now, a beautiful sunset. Then, quite suddenly, darkness fell, and the stars came out. Beautiful bright stars. The flatness of the landscape gave us a direct view of the Milky Way. Apart from a lone house or village and the odd station now and then, there were no other sources of light to compete with the stars, and this made the sky a spectacular sight.

Then, after rolling through the Cape Winelands in utter darkness and passing through the Northern Suburbs with their yellow and orange lights, we entered the city of Cape Town, and the train came to a halt at the central station. Our journey had taken 37 hours, and although I was quite energetic, I was also very tired, and I longed for my house and my bed. I was somewhat surprised to feel that returning to Cape Town felt like coming *home*.

As I walked out of the station, I reflected on the fact that I had completed my rite of passage; I had travelled almost the whole length of South Africa as a bona fide woman.

What would my process, my life, have been like if I hadn't moved to South Africa? What if I had lived these first post-coming-out months in Norway instead?

Admittedly, I wouldn't have felt foreign. I would have saved myself the administrative hurdles of moving to a different country. And I wouldn't have had to deal with the stress that comes with living in an extremely racialized society. However, these distractions have in a certain sense made life easier. In Norway, I might have focused much more on transitioning and might have ended up brooding over it, becoming uncertain and getting performance anxiety of the kind I had when I first connected with the trans community in Oslo.

I do believe that the various distractions of life in Cape Town have made my social transition process smoother and more natural; they have helped me focus on things other than dysphoria; and, of course, the challenges have made me feel all the stronger for overcoming them. In addition, I haven't really experienced too much in the way of harassment and direct transphobia from people in Cape Town, and from what I hear through the digital grapevine, I doubt Oslo would have been noticeably different in this respect. A smaller town in Norway might possibly have been worse.

Additionally, and importantly, in Cape Town I've had the opportunity to learn about the intersection of identities; the ways in which the disadvantages of being trans intersect, for example, with my white privilege. In Norway I would not have had this learning opportunity, at least not to the same degree.

— What was your name again?

You're not asking for my name; you're demanding an explanation.

– It's complicated stuff... It's Miriam.

– Ah, well, that was how you introduced yourself.

If you remembered, then why did you need to ask?

Sharing a bottle of wine with nice people from my own country – Norwegians my own age – on a sunny day in a township in the Cape Flats. I truly appreciated being able to talk and vent with people from a similar cultural background who had seen a bit of South Africa. Who would imagine that such a get-together would bring back all my old gender-related pains and insecurities?

A pat on the back from another half-stranger, the one who had lifted his eyebrows and paused just a microsecond too long and then made a point of articulating my name extra carefully after I had told him of my situation. The one who asked if I had started hormones. I readjusted my hairband, suddenly conscious, too, of my old, worn and shapeless grey hoodie and looking at the other girls' tight and well-fitting sweaters, the shapes of their faces, their curves, everything given to them by nature. The local men were coming over now and then, talking to me like one of the guys. One of the girls at our table looked at me as if she wanted me. Two middle-aged ladies were sitting on plastic chairs, guarding the bathroom. They turned me away:

– Only ladies here, the men's room is over there.

For a moment, I stood utterly perplexed; then, for a moment, I half wondered if I should tell them about my situation. But then the old exhaustion came over me, that aversion towards opening my soul to every stranger. I also didn't want to start a scene and quarrel with these two women who were obviously just doing their job; it might even be

perceived as racist. So I turned around, did as I was told, and went to the men's room. A sobering experience if ever there was one.

Returning home and enjoying a final glass of red wine alone, I felt as bad as I had ever felt. I would never reach my goal, no matter how hard I tried. The biological determinists were right: I was not a woman, yet not a man either, just nothing. At worst, I was a huge, bearded monster with a mumbling voice, a slack physique and a hunched back acquired from sitting too much in front of a desk! At best, I would always be that *something else*.

"Only ladies here".

I felt I didn't deserve to cry, because I had been sulking too much already. I was horny but couldn't fully enjoy masturbation since I didn't enjoy my own body. It was like biting into a morsel of food only to discover it to be nothing more than a hollow shell, a toy made of plastic, like the plastic loaves and plastic vegetables we used to play with in the crèche.

My mind was spinning, floating. Sometimes it's hard to know if certain things are really real or if it's all just in my mind, I thought. Do people really hold the opinions I assign to them? Am I any better than those racists who believe all Black people are lazy or stupid, or those who believe all white people are inherently aggressive and lacking in empathy? Am I a hypocrite?

Maybe I should pay less attention to what others *might* think, and instead pay more attention to what the people who really matter to me, and who know me well, *actually say*. Even if some people do have negative opinions of me, why should I care? Perhaps I should pay more attention to the mirror. When I look in the mirror, it is not a monster that looks back at me. It is a face that resembles more and more the face I saw, ever

so briefly, in the mirror of my camera on that Sunday evening in November; a face now slightly transformed by the physical procedures of laser treatment and microblading, but also by my own inner acceptance of myself. It's not the face of a faulty specimen or someone who is beaten down. It's a face I can be proud of.

Writing down the above episode made me think, and the thinking eventually made the bitterness fade. I should start writing down more of these episodes in detail, I thought, as a way of dealing with them. The time had come, it seemed to me, to stop taking everything so seriously, and instead pull myself together and just live my life. Accepting myself by accepting others. Focusing on the good things and assuming support (or at least indifference) instead of derision and malice. So many of the comments and reactions that I had allowed to bring me down could just as easily be interpreted as intended to bring me *up*. Why did I always have to interpret everything in the worst possible sense?

It's not the fault of others anymore, I thought; the fault is my own. If there is violence, it's not inflicted upon me by others; I inflict it upon myself because I'm still afraid to be who I really am.

Am I not stronger than that? Am I not known for being intelligent and rational? Have I not gone through enough already, that I should beat myself up even further for no reason at all?

I *felt* strong. The pain of the bathroom incident lessened, and eventually subsided altogether. I was still feeling a bit dizzy from the wine, but it didn't matter; it was a nice dizziness now. I had won against myself. Perhaps once and for all.

And life went on.

The practical difficulties of being an ambiguous-looking trans woman continued, of course, but my attitude towards them had changed. One incident happened when I went to Cape Town International Airport to pick up Laura who was returning to Cape Town after her holidays. I really had to pee. The ladies' room, however, was guarded by a wary-looking female cleaner who reminded me very much of the two women who had barred me from the ladies' room at the party-place a few days earlier, so I turned away. I checked the disabled room, but it was locked. I stood outside the men's room for a minute, trying to muster the courage to enter. Then a male cleaner came up to me and asked:

– Are you okay, ma'am? May I help you?

I ended up not going at all. However, my newfound positivity prevailed; I felt annoyed, but I did not feel pain. The time when I needed others to affirm my identity was over, and words didn't seem to hurt me like they used to. Not to mention the fact that I had, once again, passed in public.

Chapter 4: Showdown

I'm not sorry.
I'm not sorry for my face.
I'm not sorry for being tall.
I'm not sorry for my broad shoulders
Or my body hair, or the way my genitals look.
I'm not sorry for not meeting your expectations.
I'm not sorry for my feelings.
I'm not sorry for being.

Laura was back. Missing her had been painful, although we had texted every day and even had a voice-call. However, I did not know how much I had actually missed her until I saw her again at the airport. No, I did not truly know until I held her and kissed her.

Term was starting again, and I convinced Lisa to come with me to the Anthropology Department's opening seminar on July 24th. I appreciated it, since I often feel alone in departmental settings; as a PhD candidate I work on my own most of the time, and I didn't know too many of the other postgraduate students yet. At the seminar, the Head of Department informed us of a number of new books and publications produced by students and staff at our department. Even an undergraduate student had written a book, which I found very impressive. I was thinking about my own book project, hoping I would be able to create something of a similarly high quality.

They gave us the schedule for the department seminars. On August 21st, there would be no seminar, since there would be Master's and PhD proposal hearings instead. There would be *my* hearing. It suddenly seemed imminent – less than a month away. The Head of Department was encouraging the other postgraduate students to attend the session, to learn from it. As long as I don't become an example of what *not* to do, I thought. I was nervous but not really scared. My supervisor had given my proposal the green light just a few days earlier, and I was planning to submit it soon, after looking at it a few more times and fixing any small inaccuracies.

At the end of July, just as I had started writing this chapter, an *interesting* opinion piece was circulated among the Norwegian online transgender community. The text, written by a well-known Norwegian media personality, was an attack on trans people and, because it angered me, I decided I should mention it here. It's a good way to introduce the topic of *trans-exclusionary radical feminists* (TERFs) as well as some important aspects of contemporary trans-related politics and public debate both in Norway and globally.

Essentially, the central tenet of TERF-dom is that there is no such thing as trans people; we are, and will always be, what we were assigned at birth. A trans woman, according to TERF ideology, is a man; a trans man is a woman. According to this logic, there is no such thing as gender incongruence. I have no idea what TERFs believe gender incongruence really is, but whatever they think it is, it's obviously not what *we* think it is, i.e. a mismatch between our assigned gender and our actual gender identity.

Some people take offense at being called TERFs and call it a slur, and unfortunately it is true that certain trans activists have used the term TERF in a derogatory and even threatening manner. However, the feminists in question *do* exclude trans people from their definition of women, and as such, the TERF label is accurate. Some even self-identify as such, including, somewhat reluctantly, the author of the July opinion piece.

TERF writings distress me, not simply because of their arguments, but because of their condescending and often aggressive tone. I can't be sure, of course, that all proponents of TERF ideas really do look down on trans people, but that is certainly how they come across. They tend to position themselves as victims, dismiss out of hand the way we trans people see the world and our place in it, and seem scarcely interested in discussing with us on equal terms.

Most TERF writings I have read – opinion pieces, mostly – send a highly disrespectful message towards trans people, especially those whose very real dysphoria has permanently affected their mental health. What is worse, they spit on the graves of those of us who have been driven to suicide. The authors – cis women who, despite the disadvantage of being women in a sexist society, have the distinct privilege of being comfortable in their gender identity – spit on *my* years of pain and identity issues and my still lingering self-doubt.

People who use TERF arguments often frame themselves as champions of gender-nonconformity. They say that men should be allowed to wear dresses and paint their nails, and that women should be able to wear suits and cut their hair short. They say that breaking with mainstream norms of gender expression doesn't mean you're obliged to change your gender, and they argue that the problem stems from restrictive gender roles.

This is a highly commendable stance but, unfortunately, TERF liberality only goes so far. You're allowed to express yourself as long your gender-nonconformity remains strictly a surface phenomenon; in other words, you're allowed to be a man in drag, but God have mercy on you if you start calling yourself something other than a man. The whole point of TERF-ism is that women and men are fundamentally different due to their biological sex traits. TERFs, then, have no wish to challenge the gender binary; they try as hard as they can to *reinforce* it. In this sense, their feminism isn't radical at all, but deeply conservative.

Although proponents of TERF ideas like to rally behind the banner of gender non-conforming "men" (a category which, from the TERF point of view, includes trans women) to further their own cause, it doesn't seem like they care about us enough to consider the possibility that our so-called "fellow men" might reject us. If they did care, they wouldn't be trying to force us to intrude on cis-male spaces. These are spaces that should be men's own; nobody going by the label "woman" is supposed to be there, no matter what our genitals look like. Additionally, and significantly, these are spaces where our own safety – even our lives – may occasionally be at risk.

In the July article that set me off, the author claimed that "men" – again, including trans women – "are not exposed to violence, it's us women they're after" (my translation).⁷ This is factually wrong, and comes across as screamingly offensive when one stops to consider the violence that trans people face all the time, with *hundreds murdered every year*. A total of 325 trans and gender-diverse people were murdered worldwide in 2017 according to TGEU's *Trans Murder Monitoring* report. This was

⁷ <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/mann-kan-ikke-bli-kvinne/70040157> (retrieved 24.7.2018)

higher than the 295 of 2016, which in its turn was higher than the 271 of 2015. In other words, more and more trans and gender-diverse people are murdered every year,⁸ and as the Huffington Post reports, “the vast majority of hate-motivated killings of queer people are committed by cisgender men.”⁹ Of course, only a tiny minority of cis men commit such crimes, but the threat is still real. Trans women of colour are especially victimized.

The whole thing is highly ironic: On the one hand, TERFs argue that the presence of “men” (again, including trans women!) causes “real” women discomfort and even places them in physical peril. On the other hand, TERFs expect cis men to support their dress-wearing, nail-painting “brothers” and unquestioningly welcome us as part of the male fold. It would seem that TERFs either have a laudably high opinion of cis men’s capacity for solidarity with other Y-chromosome-carrying human beings, or they simply don’t care enough to be bothered to follow their own trail of thought to its logical endpoint. I suspect the latter. It’s also very possible, of course, that TERFs are clueless about how the world works.

There are many other ways to show why TERF-ism is not only insensitive, but illogical. A point often made within the trans community is that TERFs seem to forget about trans *men*, whom they, of course, consider “women”. TERFs say they wouldn’t want to take a shower with an AMAB¹⁰ trans woman,

⁸ <http://www.mambaonline.com/2017/11/20/world-mourns-325-trans-people-murdered-last-year/> (retrieved 24.7.2018);
<https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-trans-day-remembrance-2017/> (retrieved 24.7.2018)

⁹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opinion-signorile-gay-bi-men-murders_us_5a730f74e4b06fa61b4df141 (retrieved 24.7.2018)

¹⁰ AMAB = Assigned Male At Birth. AFAB = Assigned Female At Birth.

and that gender is determined solely by the genitals you were born with. However, would they want to take a shower with an AFAB cis-passing¹¹ trans man with a beard, a penis, a hairy body and a deep, male voice?

The authenticity of trans people boils down to the fact that we experience gender incongruence. *We* know best what we are, because *we* are the ones who feel this mismatch between our assigned identity and our inner identity. Even the World Health Organization has acknowledged this. When cis people opine about transgender identities, they're making judgements about a life-world they have no access to. Our authenticity is further proven by the fact that we do all we can to express our inner identity on the outside. By definition, a cis-passing trans woman – which is what most, if not all, trans women aspire to become – does not have male privilege, regardless of whether or not she has gone through bottom surgery or whether or not she is on HRT. She is treated exactly like every other woman, or worse, if her transness somehow reveals itself, for instance through her voice.

An additional fact, often overlooked, is that the side-effects of hormone replacement therapy leave many of us physically incapable of rape, which means that TERFs can feel quite safe in their bathrooms and changing-rooms.

I must have been in the grip of some madness when, on the 25th of July, I volunteered to participate in the VARSITY student paper's August editorial on womanhood. The call for models was sent out to all members of RainbowUCT, and even though I hadn't been active in the organization, there was still

¹¹ Looking indistinguishable from a cisgender person.

something inside me that drove me to respond. Am I not usually a shy person? What if someone tried to bring me down for not being feminine enough, or for appropriating spaces that should be reserved for more marginalized groups such as transgender people of colour? What if I ended up saying something wrong or insensitive in the interview?

Despite these reservations, I felt that taking part was the right thing to do, and I quickly came to the conclusion that a South African student paper, especially one at UCT, would never feature me instead of a trans person of colour. In fact, I found it extremely unlikely that I would be the only trans person in a project which purported to critically examine the concepts of gender and womanhood. Indeed, I wasn't! After some texting with the organizers – the creative director of VARSITY and the person who would lead the project on the ground – I felt reassured that there was nothing to worry about.

The next week was an interesting and eventful one. I was reading another one of Francis Nyamnjoh's novels, *Intimate Strangers*, which, just like the one I had read on my train trip from Johannesburg, deals with gender relations as one of its many topics. Reading the novel felt somehow inspirational and encouraging to my process of getting used to living as a woman and made me even more determined to follow through with the projects I had started. On Sunday I met with Marlene, a trans woman whom I'd gotten to know online. It was our first meeting in real life, and it was very nice. On Monday we had the briefing meeting for the VARSITY project, which went very well. I wasn't even too nervous, and nobody there had any problem with my presence. The organizers stressed the importance of making the photo shoot a safe space for everyone.

Marlene had told me there would be a protest march against gender-based violence on Wednesday the 1st of August. She invited me into the movement's Facebook group – the group, like the protest itself, was strictly for womxn and gender non-conforming people only – where I read stories of femicide, rape and other forms of abuse from all over South Africa and by women of all colours and backgrounds. I had heard a handful of such stories before through the social media grapevine, but I realized I hadn't been aware of the real scope of the problem. Not by a long stretch. Rape and beatings seem to be commonplace. There were also several mothers in the group who were sharing stories about murdered children, and murderers who were allowed to walk free.

I decided I would join the protest, which was consciously aiming to be as trans-inclusive as possible. Conveniently, it turned out that my Wednesday would be completely free. There would be a march in every major South African town and city, including, of course, Cape Town. Additionally, and importantly, women and gender non-conforming people were urged to refrain from all economic activity during that whole day by staying home from work and not buying or selling anything. That was why the protest was called *#TheTotalShutdown*. The movement was quite literally aiming to shut the country down in order to force men to acknowledge the rampant violence towards women and gender non-conforming people in South Africa as a problem.

I had never yet been to a protest in South Africa, and I was curious – as well as a little bit apprehensive – as to how it would play out.

I went to the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's District Six campus at nine o'clock in the morning, with help from Laura, since my Uber app was not functioning (refraining

from all economic activities turned out to be easier said than done). Unfortunately, neither Laura, Marlene, Lisa nor any other friends of mine were able to come to the Total Shutdown, which made it even more important for me to be there to walk in their stead. It took me a little while to find the actual meeting-place, since the CPUT campus is large, but when I did, I was warmly welcomed by one of the organizers, and got into a conversation with a middle-aged woman who represented an animal protection charity. She gave me a poster saying *Making the link between womxn abuse and animal abuse – Stop gender based violence*. I had no qualms about carrying this poster, since I was already aware that those who torture and murder humans often start out torturing and murdering animals.

Then I bumped into one of the professors of anthropology at UCT who had taken the day off to join the march. We talked for a long time and stayed together most of the time. Later on, we met two other anthropology professors as well as some students. It made me very proud of our department to see so many representing us. As we waited for the march to begin, more and more people arrived; a Golden Arrow bus drove in, its front sign saying “Charter Hire”, and it turned out to be full of Muslim women from the township of Bonteheuwel coming to participate in the protest. They were carrying a large banner with a quote of from the Prophet Muhammad:

The most complete believers are those who have the best character and the best of you are those who are the best to their wives.

I reflected on my home country, where Muslim women are routinely shamed and accused of being complicit in their own oppression simply because they wear hijabs (or simply for

being Muslim). Here, many of the protesters were wearing hijabs – even niqabs! – to match their other clothes in the black-and-red combination that was the symbol of this protest. I myself was wearing black trousers, a red vest-dress, a black leather jacket and a black hairband.

The quote by Muhammad also made me reflect on the people I have known who have been in abusive relationships – not necessarily physical abuse, but verbal and emotional abuse as well, which can be just as violent and destructive.

As the march took off at 11:30, we had grown into a very large crowd. I was trying to compare it to the Women's Day marches in Oslo as I remembered them. If not larger, this march was certainly more energetic. People were shouting – *Amandla! Awethu!* – and many were singing and toyi-toyi-ing, a phenomenon I had heard about but never actually seen in real life. Although the energy was impressive, it did not feel intimidating; it was a friendly space in which I felt I belonged. It was certainly one of the largest protest marches I had attended in many years, and probably the most disciplined one I had ever attended in my life. What impressed me most, what made me most happy, was the fact that we were such a *diverse* crowd; women and gender non-conforming people of literally all colours and from all walks of life. White people like myself, although present in considerable numbers, were not the bosses here, and men were not allowed in the protest at all. Not even trans men.

Because the procession was so long, I only got to see a few of the signs, posters and banners. Some of them were about women's access to the South African justice system. Some of them told the names and stories of women and LGBTQ+ people who had been murdered. Some drew specific attention to the rape and murder of lesbian and trans women. Some were

funny, some were harsh; many were profound in their directness and simplicity. I would happily have rallied behind them all.

Although we did have police protection, the streets through which we marched were not closed off, which surprised me. In the beginning we would halt at red lights, but we eventually stopped doing so, perhaps when it became clear that our procession was so long that we were blocking a long stretch of road and several intersections at a time, making the frequent halts a bit pointless. Most of the cars seemed to be waiting graciously (as if they had any choice in the matter), although there was one guy in a truck who demonstratively honked his horn at us. Pedestrian onlookers seemed mostly curious and many were taking photos with their phones. A few men gave us conspicuously cold stares. Because of the chants and singing I had no way of hearing what the onlookers were saying, but I later read on social media that some men had been making derogatory remarks: “Women, don’t you have some dishes to wash?”

The march ended outside Parliament, where there was singing and prayers. A man attempted to give a speech but was literally booed into silence. “Why is that man speaking? Why is that man here? Fuck off!” Others spoke after him; one woman told the stories of women and girls who had been raped and murdered, one of them as recently as that very morning. Then, at one o’clock, a moment of silence, perhaps half a minute, was observed in honour of women who had been murdered. And the organizers, from the loudspeaker truck, led the crowd in the singing of *Senzeni na*.

A representative of the movement declaimed a memorandum¹² with a list of demands to the politicians. The memorandum explicitly stated that it was made on behalf of cis women, trans women and gender-nonconforming people; it also mentioned trans and gender-nonconforming people's rights, but I was unable to catch all the details at the time. What I did bring home with me, after the proceedings had finished, was a strong feeling that the intersectional feminist movement in South Africa has come a long way further than in Norway. Seen from a South African perspective, the Norwegian feminist movement's "debate" about trans people's existence and humanity is nothing less than shameful.

The day after the Total Shutdown was the day of the VARSITY photo shoot, my first-ever modelling experience. It was the first time in my life I had had someone else arrange my makeup and clothes – the *juju* of femininity – and help me look as good as possible as a woman. The photo shoot was more work than I had imagined, but I liked it. I felt like I was in safe hands and that I would appear at my very best. The session was informal and took place in the flat of one of the organizers, but it still felt professional. Laura was there too; she was curious to see what it would be like, and her presence provided me with much-appreciated moral support.

Appearance is a strange thing. Looking in the mirror, I almost feel like I've become more feminine simply by accepting my gender identity, as if something is shining through from the inside. Also, as I become more feminine, I

¹² Read it here: <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-08-02-the-totalshutdown-memorandum-of-demands> (retrieved 19.8.2018)

sometimes feel like my resemblance to my paternal grandfather's side of the family is getting more pronounced. I wonder why that is so. When I was in Norway in May, my mother told me that my hair was getting darker, resembling the deep, dark brown of my father and his sister.

The following week, the author of the July piece was in the media spotlight yet again. She had stooped to a new low, stealing a trans person's private Facebook photos and posting them on her own page with derogatory comments. It made me realize that I'm fed up. These people do not deserve our time. We don't need their "debate" about whether trans people exist. In fact, we don't need cis people to validate our identities and we don't need to wait for cis people to figure out whether we should be allowed to live our lives the way we want. My humanity is not up for discussion. What we need is acknowledgement and respect. Now.

I had started to feel a bit empty; my proposal was submitted, and I had difficulty finding the motivation to work on my paper for the ASnA conference. It felt like there were all these things I *should* be doing, and that I was procrastinating and wasting my time. On the contrary, I was right on track with everything, but it was difficult to truly appreciate it. My guess is that this had something to do with the fact that June was an extremely busy month with paid work and a lot of reading and writing, whereas in July (and August), my long-distance work contract with the trade union in Oslo had expired and my proposal was so nearly finished that there was little more reading to do. The contrast was huge.

It had been a long time since I last visited the dentist, and I decided to go for a dental check-up. Two visits were required. Sitting in the waiting room on one of the visits, I remember

reading a news story¹³ about a school in the United States where a group of parents had been “warning” each other about a twelve-year-old transgender student, referring to her as “this thing” and one man even threatening to cut off her penis. When I met the dentist, she was slightly confused due to the fact that I had booked the appointment as Miriam but written my legal name on the patient form. She had never seen my birth name before, and wondered what nationality it was; as I replied, I also explained to her that I wasn’t using that name anymore. We had a very nice conversation. She asked me about what I was doing in Cape Town, and when I told her that I always have to give my legal name in bureaucratic contexts, she smiled and asked:

– So why don’t you just change it?

Why indeed! Those three years were starting to seem like a very long time.

One by one, days were being ticked off the calendar. Tick. Women’s Day, August 9th, was uneventful. We were still waiting for VARSITY to release their new issue. Tick. Another week had passed; the final week had come. Only one week left to prepare for the presentation of my research proposal. The presentation, and the following question-and-answer session, would determine the fate of my project; would determine if I truly had what it takes to do research at doctoral level. How would this climax – or perhaps anti-climax – of seven months’ worth of work and ambition play out? Would my project be

¹³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6058113/Oklahoma-parents-make-online-threats-transgender-student.html> (retrieved 19.8.2018)

stalled? Would the whole thing be a repetition, in public, of my Master's degree oral examination in Oslo two years earlier? I had left the examination room with the curious combination of a good mark (a "B") and a feeling of inadequacy and disappointment.

Tick. My final meeting with my supervisor before the presentation was encouraging and interesting, as always. Tick. It was Friday. Friday already! I received an email from the Head of Department, which she had sent to the committee and in which she had attached my proposal as well as the proposal of one other candidate, a forensic anthropologist working in Zimbabwe. We would be two people presenting on Tuesday, then. Our texts were in circulation; they were being read and evaluated. Things were getting real.

Was I doing enough? Was I even properly preparing myself at all?

Tick. After I joined the Shutdown movement, not a single day went by without some new story popping up in my Facebook feed: A child gone missing, a woman or girl raped, a woman or girl murdered, a woman or girl raped and murdered. On Wednesday, a lecturer at UCT had been placed on compulsory medical leave after someone had leaked Facebook posts – which were circulated in the Shutdown group – in which this lecturer admitted to having fantasized about raping and killing his two-year-old daughter during a period of depression. On Saturday, news broke that a nine-year-old girl had been raped and then strangled to death, her body dumped next to a highway near Johannesburg.

Tick, tick. It was Monday, and I went to do my hair at the salon in Sea Point. My regular stylist had quit his job at the salon and started working on a ship, so my appointment was with someone new. She turned out to be a very nice woman,

and she had in fact visited Norway back in the days when she was working at sea. We started talking about gender transitioning, and the stylist told me that not only was her step-mother a trans woman; she had been the first person in South Africa to undergo medical gender transitioning, back in the 1970s! It is indeed a small world. The step-mother, now 70 years old, had kept a low profile; she hadn't done any interviews with the media, and her identity and experiences as a transgender person had not led her to become an activist for the cause.

The more I think about it, the more I realize how early it still is not only in the history of transgender rights, but in the history of LGBTQ+ rights in general. In Chapter 1, I mentioned that my grandmother had an uncle who was homosexual. He was the elder brother of my great-grandmother, and his name was Ivar Cederholm.¹⁴ Born in Oslo in 1902, Uncle Ivar (as he is known to the family) was a rather famous singer in his day, performing in Scandinavia and London. His sexual orientation, and his relationships, were always an “open secret” in the family and in the professional community of performing artists. Although he died in 1982, ten years after homosexuality had been decriminalized in Norway, Uncle Ivar never truly came out. It was the generation *after* Ivar, people born in the 1920s and 1930s, who began to acknowledge their sexuality in public. The first person in Norway to do so, Karen-Christine “Kim” Friele, is still an activist today, at the age of 83.

¹⁴ He is mentioned in the Great Norwegian Encyclopedia: https://snl.no/Ivar_Cederholm (retrieved 20.8.2018)

Tick. It was Tuesday, the 21st of August. The day of reckoning.

It was seven months, almost to the day, since I had arrived in Cape Town to start my studies. And it was almost a year since I had begun the long process of coming out as trans.

Neville Alexander Building is one of the more “modern” and less colonial-looking buildings on Upper Campus. The HUMA seminar room was very familiar to me, being the venue for our departmental seminars. How many times had I visualized myself sitting at that table, doing the talking myself? How many times had I imagined the sound of my own voice as I presented my proposal, and the questions from the committee and the spectators?

Now, I was doing it. I was hearing my own voice speak; thick with accent sometimes, but it seemed to be no hindrance to communication. There were only five spectators, one of which was Laura, as well as the committee itself. Laura’s presence was comforting.

And then it was over.

It didn’t go *perfectly*, but then again, what is perfection? It went well. I had delivered my presentation, and the committee followed up with questions and comments. I would submit my proposal again, with a few slight changes, but the task was doable. One member of the committee came up to me after the session and told me that my research project was significant and important. It was very encouraging.

Laura and I walked together down to Lower Campus. On the way there, we passed by the office of VARSITY, where we picked up copies of the new issue which had arrived from the printer just a couple of hours earlier. I flipped the pages, located the editorial piece, found my picture, and saw that the author had chosen to caption it with that quote of mine which

I believe sums up my experience of womanhood – or *womxnhood* – most succinctly.

Miriam Aurora Hammeren Pedersen, a PhD student in the department of Anthropology, explains that 'womxnness is something that's in my soul'. How can we put that feeling in a box? What do we call it?



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Parting with Laura, I went home feeling mentally exhausted. I would be meeting my supervisor the next morning at seven to plan for the revision of my proposal.

What I had been most nervous about wasn't the *content* of the proposal but delivering the presentation itself. Keeping my head cold and my English good, not getting flustered, and carrying myself unapologetically as a woman. I had passed that

test. For the rest, there would be ample opportunity to learn and practise. And after all, it's not as though I lack experience with standing my ground.

A woman, but trans. White, but foreign. Rootless, but rooted. An outsider within, an insider without. A complex and challenging intersection indeed, but could there be any better starting point for someone who wants to understand the dynamics of society?

Now for the next step of the journey!

Epilogue I

How easy it is to deny the existence of something you've never seen or experienced! How easy to dismiss the very possibility of gender incongruence, when *you* have always taken your own gender identity for granted. "It's a delusion," someone once said to me about being transgender. Someone is deluding themselves indeed. But it's not us.

I have crossed the allegedly uncrossable boundary and renounced the prescribed identity that was tied to my sex traits. It has been a deeply personal process and a small occurrence in the grand scheme of human activity but, looking back, even this small deviation from the norm, this one tiny human being's choice to go against the current in order to be herself, feels like an act of revolt. Even in a country like my native Norway, with its otherwise well-deserved reputation for being very liberal in regard to LGBTQ+ issues, sex traits are still seen as a cornerstone of human identity and arguably *the* fundamental coordinator of human interaction.

Like the young man in the Prelude, not only do many people find it difficult to relate to gender incongruence, they can even be actively hostile, seeing any norm-transgression as a threat – a threat to their own gender identity, perhaps, or their carefully constructed image of what the world is like and how human interaction is supposed to work.

After starting to live my life as a woman outwardly as well as inwardly, I've learned through experience that there are such things as male privilege and cis privilege, and that I had it rather easy until I came out as trans. The restroom issue is only one

example. I also feel my privilege as a white¹⁵ person even more strongly now, not because being out as trans has given me *more* white privilege – it remains the same as before – but because white privilege offsets some of the disadvantages of being trans. I admit, with a great deal of embarrassment, that it sometimes feels relieving. My positionality is a good example of intersectionality in practice: You might have one type of privilege and lack another, or have several types of privilege to various degrees. Like the *jujus* of Amos Tutuola, your various privileges and disadvantages are activated in specific contexts and intersect in complex ways.

Few people are solely privileged or solely disadvantaged. The fact that human existence has many facets means that most people fall somewhere in-between the extremes of absolute privilege and absolute disadvantage. Although certain aspects of one's positionality – like race and gender – are obviously more significant than others, I strongly disagree with those who claim, for instance, that skin colour predetermines every single aspect of a person's life, or that women are perpetual victims in relations with men.

It's sad how intersectionality – a concept intended to capture the *multidimensionality* of human existence – is so often misunderstood and twisted into the complete opposite: A binary where your various identities and experiences are heaped together and weighed in bulk in order to categorize you as either oppressed or not oppressed (or worse, as either oppressed or an oppressor). Such an oversimplified understanding of the world breeds unnecessary antagonism

¹⁵ *White* as in phenotype and lived experience, not as a claim to “racial purity”. I do in fact have non-European ancestors, whom I acknowledge as part my history and my being.

and bitterness and does nothing to further true social transformation.

I remember someone – a Black South African cis woman – telling me that “Black people hate white people just as trans people hate cis people”. I had to ask her respectfully to refrain from assigning me opinions I don’t actually hold. Even if there are trans people out there who do feel hate towards the cis community, that hate is not something to be normalized or glorified in any form.

Yes, hate might provide energy for militant action, but it’s the wrong kind of energy and it will always spur the wrong kind of action. My stance is simple: As I don’t wish to become a target for violence because of an identity I haven’t chosen, neither do I wish to target others because of *their* unchosen identities. What I dream of is a world where such identities lead neither to privilege nor to disadvantage; a world of equal opportunity, a world of human beings instead of categories. Such a world can only be achieved through dialogue and understanding between all groups of people.

Epilogue 2

When I realized that I was a woman and came out as trans to my parents, it felt like the end of a process. In reality, it was only the beginning. Many of us have to wrestle our inner “demons”, our self-doubt and internalized queerphobia, long after our official coming-out. Some of us never get to the stage of truly loving ourselves. Some of us have to fight our families, our churches, our communities, our partners, our governments. Some of us face not only transphobia, but racism, ableism and other social and structural obstacles as well. Some of us are thrown on the street and some of us literally have to fight for our lives. There is strength in numbers and there is strength in knowledge. I know I’m privileged in very many ways, and I have used my privilege to tell my story so that others may learn from it and, most of all, to let other emerging trans people know that they are not alone.

It’s not just you.

What do you do when you realize that one of your most fundamental ideas about yourself is actually false? How do you resituate yourself in a world that has been turned upside down? This book charts the early stage of the author's journey of gender transition, as well as her process of settling down in South Africa as a fledgling academic. The story is a deeply personal one, but also one that will resonate with other transgender people, migrants, academic hopefuls, and border-crossers of all kinds. As a story of coming to terms with an identity in flux, it illustrates the fundamental open-endedness of all human identities.

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